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Religious Policy in the Russian Borderlands: The 1860s Mennonite Schism

by

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Abstract

The Mennonite Brethren schism of the 1860s was a defining moment for the Mennonite community in Russia. Nearly 150 years after the event, this break in the church still exists and continues to shape Mennonite identity and to provoke theological debate between the separate parties. Traditionally, Mennonite historiography has emphasized the relevance of the schism to the development of Mennonite religious, social and cultural life. Yet, the significance of the schism extends beyond a localized, Mennonite interpretation. As subjects of the Russian empire, Mennonites lived within a vast multi-confessional territory governed by an autocrat and an increasingly convoluted bureaucracy. Throughout the nineteenth century Russia experienced rapid economic and social changes brought on by government initiated which weakened boundaries between social and religious groups. Minorities in the empire, such as the Mennonites, were not only affected by these changes, they also participated in shaping this emerging context. The 1860s schism illustrates how an ostensibly internal disagreement challenged religious and social boundaries between Mennonites and their neighbours and exposed conflicting views among Mennonite leaders and government officials over how to resolve these tensions. Divisions between Mennonites over an acceptable solution to the crisis, along with completing approaches by various governmental bodies impeded its resolution. In particular, the difficulty of the Russian government in addressing the problems that arose in the aftermath of the Mennonite schism in a meaningful way confirms the inadequacies of its policy of religious toleration for governing its religious minorities groups.

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Introduction: Opportunities and Challenges: Mennonites in New Russia

In his diary entry for 27 January 1838, David Epp, a minister and farmer from the Khortitsa colony, wrote:

> Peter Driediger from Neuendorf, D. Thiessen and Johann Braun from Schoenhorst and Gerhard Braun from Neu-Osterwick appeared before Lehrdienst (ministerial council) on Thursday. They got drunk at the August fair in Nikopol and danced, cavorted and engaged in misconduct. They had drawn in Claas Dyck of Osterwick, but he was not at fault. The matter will be dealt with by the Bruederschaft (council of all voting males) following holy communion.[1]

Epp's diary provides a glimpse into the economic, social and religious atmosphere of Mennonite communities in New Russia (current-day Southern Ukraine) approaching the mid-nineteenth- century mark. His entries about daily life reveal many subtle changes to Mennonite life such as expanding business opportunities at fairs outside Mennonite villages and the undesirable opportunities on these occasions for moral digression by Mennonite youths. These entries also confirm the strong role of religious leadership in regulating the conduct of Mennonite colonists and the council's broad definition of dissolute behaviour. For instance, Epp recorded that the ministerial council summoned Dirk Braun to appear before it for the offence of "not weed[ing] his portion in the village plantation...on time."[2] Over forty years after the first settlers relocated from Prussia, Mennonites had managed to maintain their social and religious boundaries in the Russian empire and create sturdy, well-ordered and modest communities to reflect their equally modest and well-ordered moral values. Perhaps not as firm and impenetrable as when they first arrived in Russia, Mennonite communities had still sustained their unique ethno-religious identity throughout their time on imperial Russian soil. Nonetheless, as

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[1] David Epp, *The Diaries of David Epp* trans.& ed. John B. Toews (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000), 53.
[2] Ibid, 39.

Epp's recollections of Mennonite boys acting 'un-Mennonite' at a fair in a Russian village intimates, new challenges arose as Mennonites deepened their roots in New Russia by interacting and integrating with their surroundings. Mennonites struggled in this environment to preserve the solidarity and moral standing of their community, while simultaneously participating in the wealth of opportunities provided by their adopted homeland.

This challenge became more pronounced in the 1860s when Russian Mennonites faced their first major religious crisis since their arrival in Russia. In 1860, Mennonites experienced a religious schism, which divided families, friends and congregations. The schism originated out of a dispute over acceptable religious practices in the colonies. Unable to resolve the schism internally, both sides of the dispute attempted to strengthen their position against the other by soliciting the support of the Russian authorities, with the established churches eliciting sympathy from regional governmental bodies and the dissidents who called themselves Mennonite Brethren concentrating their efforts at the national level. This split from the Mennonite churches raised difficult questions for Mennonites and the Russian government about how to define membership in the Mennonite brotherhood; the relationship between secular and religious bodies and their respective jurisdictions in the colonies; the role of the laity in religious ceremonies; the puncturing of ethno-confessional boundaries in the region; and the meaning of religious toleration in the empire.

Traditionally, Mennonite historiography has presented the schism as an internal religious dispute, significant primarily to Mennonite communities.[3] This approach fails to

[3] For example, see James Urry, *None but Saints: Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hypersion Press Limited, 1989); John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*

place the schism in the broader context of the blossoming economic, social and religious ties between ethno-confessional groups in New Russia and to capture the difficulties these developments caused for the state's governance of its borderlands. It also fails to recognize the importance of Russia's ambiguous policy of religious toleration, which contributed to further fuelling the dispute.

Russia's religious policy towards its minorities centred on an ostensibly simple concept: religious toleration (veroterpimost'). To incorporate a diverse array of minority ethno-confessional groups into the empire, Russia, an Orthodox state, bestowed freedom of religious organization and worship on recognized minority faiths. In exchange for this freedom, the state banned proselytizing among Orthodox believers, as conversion from Orthodoxy was illegal in the empire, and in many cases, it encouraged loyalty to the tsar by linking the ecclesiastical structure of foreign faiths to the state bureaucracy.

Yet, the government negotiated the specific details of its religious policy on a case-by-case basis as opposed to articulating a standardized policy to address state/religious minority relations across the empire. This approach contributed to the ambiguity surrounding Russia's conceptualization of 'religious toleration.' As well, the bureaucratization of religious affiliation through the co-option of religious elites or, in others cases, through the overlap between civil and religious jurisdictions, blurred the demarcation between these spheres and, in cases of community disputes, further complicated the articulation of Russia's religious policy. For example, in the case of the

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(Hillsboro, Kansas: Board of Christian Literature, 1975); A.H. Unruh, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Brudergemeinde, 1860-1954* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Im Auftrage des Fürsorgekomitees der Generalkonferenz von Nord-Amerika, 1954); John B. Toews, "The Russian Origins of the Mennonite Brethren: Some Observations" in *Pilgrims and Strangers: essays in Mennonite Brethren History*. ed., Paul Toews (Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1977); John B. Toews, *Perilous Journey: The Mennonite Brethren in Russia 1860-1910* (Winnipeg, Kindred Press, 1988).

Mennonites, the government linked religious and civil rights to the Mennonite colonial status. In fact, exemption from military service, permitted by the government in recognition of the centrality of pacifism to the Mennonite faith, was not included as a subcategory of Mennonite religious rights; instead, the government confirmed this privilege as part of Mennonites' social and economic benefits. Nonetheless, a lack of clarity about what constituted religious toleration did not imply indifference on the part of the tsarist state in addressing religious issues in the empire. The state took seriously its role as the benefactor of religious minorities and protector of Russian Orthodoxy. However, the exact criteria employed by the state to shape its interaction with these groups were not always apparent.

Scholars of Russia have proposed theories about the over-arching principles that shaped the tsarist state's treatment of religious minority groups. These theories differ in the emphasis they place on the strength of ideological versus pragmatic impetus underlying the government's interpretation of religious toleration and over the role of other mitigating factors that affected its implementation. The Mennonite schism offers a unique case study to test the relevance of these theories to Russia's borderlands during a period of state-driven reform and to begin to sketch out how Russia's religious policy worked in practice. The involvement of the Russian state in the schism illustrates how the government's poorly enunciated religious policy failed to alleviate tensions and resolve this dispute.

The Mennonites in New Russia

The historical treatment of religious minority groups by the Russian government exhibits this competition between ideological and pragmatic approaches to religious

policy. Prince Vladimir handpicked Orthodoxy and converted Kievan Rus', thereby officially beginning Russia's long-standing relationship within Orthodoxy. As Russia perpetually expanded its borders, a vast, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional empire slowly took shape. The swelling empire not only enveloped diverse ethnic groups living on conquered land, but Russia also added, through the encouragement of foreign immigration, all types of settlers from central, eastern, and western Europe. Throughout Russia's history, its rulers combined pragmatism with ideology when dealing with non-Russians in the empire. For example, in the mid-16th century, after conquering Kazan, a territory populated by Muslims and pagans, Ivan IV sought to ensure the loyalty of his new territory by offering the Kazan elites privileges in exchange for their conversion to Christianity.[4] Ivan IV's conflation of political loyalty with religious affiliation hints at a prevalent understated belief of Russia's political elite. Not prone to subtleties, Ivan IV emphasized his desire for Kazan to be Christian in the way he "banned the construction of new mosques and ordered the mosques demolished and churches built in their stead."[5] Despite Ivan IV's overt support of the Christianization of Kazan, he hesitated to fully press the issue. Fearful of reprisals from the Ottoman empire, Ivan IV pragmatically chose not to dispatch Orthodox missionaries to the region.[6]

By Catherine II's reign in the eighteenth century, Russia had shifted from a pre-modern state to an imperial European power and its policy towards religious minorities reflected this change. Under Catherine II, Russia still combined pragmatism with ideology in forming its treatment of religious minorities, but Catherine interpreted

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[4] Michael Khodarkovsky, "The Conversion of non-Christians in Early Modern Russia" in *Of Religion and Empire* Ed. Robert P Geraci & Michael Khodarkovsky (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 123.
[5] Ibid., 121.
[6] Ibid.

religious affiliation in a new way, which fit into her self-identity as an enlightened ruler. Catherine still viewed religious policy as a tool of governance needed to instill loyalty into minority groups and to integrate Russia's borderland into the empire; however, she relied on a different approach to achieve these goals. Instead of conversion, Catherine proposed toleration as the most effective technique for dealing with Russia's religious diversity. According to this view, the toleration of "religious belief and, more important, the institutions which propagated those beliefs, [was] essential for creating and maintaining a semblance of social harmony and control."[7] Orthodoxy was still the preferred faith for the population, but the state was not willing to risk revolt over religious conversions. Catherine's model of religious toleration relied on cooperation with religious elites from minority groups, as Russia, like many other European states "look[ed] to religious elites of diverse faiths as extensions of state authority, to instill moral behaviour, social discipline, and submission to the general laws."[8] Therefore, the government attempted to regulate religious practice and belief by subsuming the religious ecclesiastical structures of foreign faiths under the government's control.

The immigration of the Mennonites to New Russia illustrates Catherine's approach to religious diversity. In the late eighteenth century, Mennonites, a Protestant, Anabaptist denomination engaged primarily in agricultural pursuits and committed to preserving the insularity of their communal existence emigrated to New Russia on the invitation of Catherine II. A relationship of convenience, Catherine envisioned prosperity in her newly annexed territory and sought the help of foreign colonists from Europe to cultivate the land. In exchange for their settlement in the region, Catherine offered

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[7] Gregory Bruess, *Religion, Identity and Empire* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1997), xiii.
[8] Robert Crews, "Empire and the Confessional State: Islam and Religious Politics in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *The American Historical Review* 108, (2003): 55.

freedom of religious belief, military exemption, and self-administration to the Mennonite colonists. Mennonites lobbied for their agreement with the Russian government to be officially enshrined in a Charter of Privileges, which Paul I granted in 1800.[9] For Mennonites, this document guaranteed the privileges associated with Mennonite colonial status and symbolized the exclusivity of the Mennonite identity.

The government provided two large sections of territory on which the Mennonites settled into two colonies. In the Ekaterinoslav province, Mennonites created the Khortitsa colony in 1789 and fifteen years later, in 1804, Mennonites settled in the Molochna colony, sixty villages 165 kilometres away in the Taurida province. During the Mennonites' early years in New Russia, the Russian regional government proved willing to help the colonists, yet lacked the necessary resources needed to make their transition to life on the steppe easy. Through primarily their own expertise, the Mennonites relatively quickly built functioning farming villages on their allotment of land from the Russian government.

The 1830s witnessed a new commitment by the state to invigorating Russia's economy. To start this process of economic reform, tsar Nicholas I decided to address the perennial problem of Russia's backward state peasantry through the formation of a new ministry "to provide [them] with the most proximate and direct tutelage so as to improve their condition": the Ministry of State Domains.[10] As the Russian government enlarged its bureaucracy at the national level, it also undertook a number of regional initiatives to stimulate economic growth in its borderlands, including in New Russia. New Russia

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[9] For a translated version of this document, see James Urry, *None but Saints: Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hypersion Press Limited, 1989), Appendix I, 282.
[10] Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 137.

served as an ideal testing ground for the motivated and ambitious bureaucrats who began to develop under Nicholas I to experiment with new ideas aimed at improving the lives of the peasantry.[11] The geographical distances of New Russia from the Russian heartland allowed these men freedom to try new methods to stimulate economic development, in particular, the growth of Russia's agricultural industry. Although the scale of reform was small, and not overly successful, the information gathered during the Nicholavean period prepared many of Russia's top bureaucrats for the large scale reforms that took place under the next tsar, Alexander II.

During this upsurge of reforms, the Guardian Committee, a regional administrative body in charge of foreign colonists, initiated its own reform plan to stimulate economic growth in the Mennonite colony of Molochna. In 1830, the Guardian Committee formed the Forestry Society to encourage the cultivation of trees in the Molochna region and appointed Mennonite Johann Cornies as its chair. Six years later, armed with a broader mandate to facilitate the "more efficient allocation of limited Mennonite resources; [the] more efficient exploitation of those resources; and rural industrialization", the Agricultural Society replaced the Forestry Society, with Johann Cornies still at the helm.[12] Cornies, an adept administrator, introduced new farming practices, and new commercial crops into Mennonite communities. These reforms, combined with regional economic developments, such as the creation of a port at the city of Berdiansk, which was sixty-five kilometres from Molochna, transformed Mennonite

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[11] For more on the development of Russia's bureaucracy, see W. Bruce Lincoln, *In the Vanguard of Reform: Russia's Enlightened Bureaucrats 1825-1861* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1982).
[12] John Staples, *Cross- Cultural Encounters on the Ukrainian Steppes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003),118.

interaction with the regional economy.[13] The opening of a port at Berdiansk also increased the number of fairs held in the area. In addition to being places where young Mennonite men would 'sow their wild oats' by indulging in dancing and drinking, Mennonites could barter and trade in "raw wool and cotton, textiles, manufactured goods, imported luxury goods, and livestock."[14] In 1843, twenty-nine fairs were held in Melitopol and Berdiansk uezds; three years later, fifty fairs took place.[15]

By the mid-century, travel among Mennonites for business and pleasure was quite common. Epp's diary makes regular reference to his own journeys and the travels of his friends and family both inside and outside the Khortitsa colony. Trips by Mennonites to fairs and to towns such Ekaterinoslav allowed not only for economic transactions with non-Mennonites, but also exposed them to other religious and cultural practices. For example on 6 January 1842, Epp witnessed the Orthodox Feast of Theophany. In this annual ceremony of great social and religious significance for Orthodox believers, Epp watched as a priest led his parishioners in a religious procession to the river bank, where he prayed over the water and blessed the water by dipping a cross three times into a cross- shaped hole in the ice.[16] Unimpressed with this symbolic restoration of God's natural order, Epp concisely and condescendingly described the elaborate ceremony in two sentences in his diary: "I witnessed the blessing of the waters in Ekaterinoslav. What superstition and vain action!"[17] This example illustrates how witnessing the religious

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[13] Ibid.,123.
[14] Ibid.,134.
[15] Ibid.
[16] On the ritual, see Izabella Shangina, *Russkie prazdniki. Ot sviatok do sviatok* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka Klassika, 2004), 45-47.
[17] Epp,169.

practices of other faiths did not necessarily inspire reverence by the observer, but it did expand the cultural experience of the Mennonite colonists.

By the late 1840s, Mennonites remained uninterested in religious relations with their Orthodox neighbours, but proved a willing audience for the Protestant revival movement of Pietism. Led by the charismatic Lutheran minister Eduard Wuest, who travelled to the Russian empire from Wuerttemberg in 1845, this movement encouraged a new approach to religious faith, in which "the Gospel might move souls to be free and spontaneous."[18] A forceful and engaging public speaker, Wuest's fiery sermons used personal examples to communicate his message, which gained him many followers from Mennonite and Lutheran communities in New Russia who responded positively to the movement's emphasis on personal redemption. Wuest also met monthly with a group of Mennonites for an afternoon of fellowship. In his recollections of Wuest's activities, Jakob Reimer, an early Mennonite Brethren leader, described these gatherings as occasions "to strengthen one another in faith and to take cognizance of or admonish one another to conduct ourselves as worthy members of the body of Christ."[19] Mennonite elders viewed these meetings and Wuest's ministry in a different light. August Lenzmann, a Mennonite elder of the Gnadenfeld congregation, did not question Wuest's heartfelt belief, but criticized his tendency to focus on God's gift of saving grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Lenzmann argued that this type of preaching

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[18] Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, trans. J.B. Toews, A. Friesen et al. (Fresno, Calif., 1978), 208 [1st pr. In German in Russia, 1911].
Pietist ideas circulated in Mennonite communities long before Wuest's arrival. Already in the 1820s, people like Johann Bonkemper spread pietism throughout Southern Russia. Many groups incorporated elements of the movement into their spiritual worship. However, in the case of the Mennonites, Wuest's ministry sparked complete reconsideration of formal worship practices.
[19] Friesen, 206.

could be misinterpreted by the laity to mean that all their actions were free from sin. As Lenzmann wrote:

> Unfortunately, the spiritual food offered the ignorant and inexperienced masses was not always imparted with the necessary Christian wisdom. This gave occasion to those inclined toward fanaticism – who, although not willfully, also naturally misunderstood him–to move in a direction which could only lead to their own destruction…[20]

Lenzmann's paternalistic response toward the laity's longing for spiritual participation illustrates his understanding of religious life as consisting of clearly demarcated roles for ministers to present the scripture and for the laity to absorb, but not to interpret these lessons.

Upheavals in the Mennonite Colonies

In Mennonite villages, this divergence over the acceptable boundaries and forms of religious participation caused tensions, as the Pietist movement stressed the role of the individual in achieving salvation. Inspired by this new approach to faith, some Mennonites began to question the moral health of their communities. These Mennonites grew increasingly critical of their religious leaders, accusing them of taking a lackadaisical approach to responding to moral deterioration of the Mennonite communities. Religious life, they argued, had become hollow as Mennonites had lost their moral compass and acted in disregard of core Mennonite beliefs about proper Christian behaviour.

The practice of gathering in homes of individuals for fellowship outside the church continued to be an outlet for those who felt their spiritual needs to be unfulfilled through traditional Mennonite institutions. After an elder their request to take communion

[20] Ibid., 208.

apart from the congregation, these Mennonites presented the Molochna church council with their intention to form their own church congregation. The secessionists (eventually known as the Brethren) accused the established churches of following a nominal faith and declared themselves unable to continue to worship in such an environment. The schism widened to include Mennonites in the Khortitsa colony, who also derided the piety of Mennonite colonists and demanded a broader role for the laity in religious ceremonies. In response, the majority of the established Mennonite congregations refused to recognize the legitimacy of the movement, thereby threatening the Brethren's colonist status and access to Mennonite privileges in the empire.

To facilitate a broader role for the laity in spiritual life, the Brethren reconfigured their religious ceremonies to encourage individuals to express publicly their inner joy inspired by their faith. The Brethren held outdoor ceremonies, where they would sing, dance and praise God. Their actions earned them the name of Huepfer, translated from German as the 'jumpers.' It is not entirely clear if the name originated from inside the Mennonite community or from the surrounding German colonies, but the Russian government adopted the word to refer to the schismatic group in official correspondence. Notably, the Russian government used the term 'Huepfer' indiscriminately, to refer not only to Mennonites, but also Lutherans who practised high-spirited worship services.

The disruption in Mennonite communities caused by the schism raised important questions for the Mennonites and the Russian government about who had the authority to determine acceptable religious practices and to regulate religious life. The exodus of the Brethren from the established Mennonite churches created a state of animosity between the two groups, which could not be solved internally by Mennonite authorities. Civil and

religious Mennonite authorities refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Brethren movement, but they also would not commit themselves to the irreversible act of exiling the secessionists.[21] Instead, they used their positions of power in the community to restrict the Brethren's participation in village life. In spite of these efforts, the Mennonite Brethren movement grew through new converts primarily from Mennonite colonists, but also from local German communities, both Lutheran and Catholic. Proselytizing, a favoured, but illegal activity of the Brethren, even gathered Ukrainian believers into the evangelical fold.

In the midst of this religious crisis, a second confrontation occurred between segments of Mennonite society, which threatened Mennonite communal identity. In the Mennonite colonies, even though "ownership of land, or at least access to it, lay at the core of Mennonite life", many families found themselves without access, or the prospect of owning farmland.[22] By the beginning of the 1860s, the landless formed a large percentage of the Mennonite population with 60 percent of Molochna and 50 percent of Khortitsa Mennonites not owning land.[23] Since the landless could not vote in village and district matters, the Mennonite political structure attributed higher status to landowners.[24] Being landless did not, however, necessarily imply poverty. Many Mennonites pursued economic opportunities other than farming in New Russia and became skilled artisans or businessmen. Nonetheless, there remained many poor Mennonites who viewed access to farmland as imperative to the quality of their families' lives.

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[21] John B.Toews,ed., *The Story of the Early Mennonite Brethren: Reflections of a Lutheran Churchman* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2002), 53-54.
[22] Urry, 196.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 199.

Without an acceptable solution to both parties available, the Mennonites turned to the Russian government for help. As in the case of the religious schism, the landless and landowners petitioned the Russian government to plead their case. The government created the Land Commission of 1869 to propose a settlement. In the end, both groups experienced dissatisfaction, with the landowners disgruntled that they had to divide the colonies' land reserves and purchase land outside the colonies for the landless, and the landless frustrated with the amount of land they received.[25] Like the schism, this crisis provides another illustration of the divisive changes happening in Mennonite communities, as differentiation in wealth and status between Mennonites grew. These changes, combined with external challenges such as land hunger in New Russia, caused difficulties for Mennonites to solve community disputes internally, which, in turn, encouraged their reliance on the tsarist state for conflict resolution.[26]

The factors that shaped the evolution of this relationship between minority groups and the Russian government is an understudied area of Russian history. The Russian government allowed minority groups such as the Mennonites to maintain their distinct identity by enabling them to regulate their community life through self-administered civil and religious institutions, but increasingly found itself drawn into local economic, social and religious disputes. As the Mennonite schism illustrates, the Russian government did not enter into these situations as an impartial arbitrator, but rather as a party interested in

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[25] Ibid., 205.

[26] Research by James Urry [*None But Saints*; "The Social Background to the Emergence of the Mennonite Brethren in 19th- century Russia," *The Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6 (1988): 8-35] and Harvey Dyck ["Landlessness in the Old Colony: The Judenplan Experiment 1850-1880" *Mennonites in Russia*. ed., John Friesen (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989)] has demonstrated that a direct link between the Brethren movement and the landless crisis did not exist. In other words, current evidence does not show an overlap between active members of the Brethren movement and those fighting for greater access to land. However, Urry's article on the social background of the Brethren does argue that many of the Brethren leaders were wealthy non-land owning Mennonites. Further research into the similarities and dissimilarities of the movements would enhance our understanding of this volatile period in Russian Mennonite history.

promoting its own agenda –although that agenda was not always clearly articulated. The reaction of state officials to the Mennonite schism demonstrates the government's concern over maintaining stability in its borderlands and its recognition of the intricate effect of religious beliefs on social stability.

This thesis relies on a variety of primary Russian, German and English sources, including newspaper articles, government documents, diaries and memoirs to analyse the schism and its aftermath. The core of my argument is drawn from five main sources, which offer a variety of perspectives on the schism. P.M Friesen's book, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, re-tells of the story of the schism and the early history of the Mennonite Brethren church in Russia through a compilation of primary source documents. As one of the foremost early Russian Mennonite historians and a member of the Mennonite Brethren church, Friesen's account offers a somewhat impartial insider's perspective on the Brethren movement and, in general, is the most consistently cited source on Mennonite life in Russia. The memoirs of Jacob Bekker, one of the signatories to the Brethren's secession document, also provide an insider account of the early Brethren activities and beliefs. Written and published after his immigration to the United States in 1875, Bekker's memoirs details his interpretations of major events and debates in the movement, but as recollections of a man intimately involved in the formation of the new church, this source was used with caution.

Government documents form the base of this study. I gathered these sources from three different locations: microfilmed government documents from archives in St. Petersburg and Odessa; reproduced documents and correspondence from the Khortitsa district office archives in a collection complied by Bishop Aleksii (Dorodnitsyn); and

John B. Toews' translation of a number of government documents from the St. Petersburg archives, particularly reports sent by Alexander Brune, a representative from the Lutheran consistory, to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. These documents uniquely present the schism from a number of different perspectives. Local, regional, and central authorities corresponded about the events unfolding in the Mennonite colonies, thereby preserving their interpretation of the Brethren's activities and the state of affairs in the wider Mennonite community. In particular, the government documents written by Russian officials offer an outsider's perspective on the schism, a viewpoint not emphasized in traditional Mennonite historiography.

In my research, I encountered two significant source problems. The Brethren (or Huepfer) movement occurred in both Molochna and Khortitsa Mennonite colonies. The Molochna movement officially began in 1860 and the Khortitsa movement two years later. As these groups shared fellowship, a name, and a doctrine of faith, they have traditionally been presented as the same movement. I follow this standard. Nonetheless, 165 kilometres separated Molochna and Khortitsa and although cooperation existed, the development of the Brethren movement in each colony has not been properly addressed in the literature. A complete set of source material for each colony cannot be found, making it difficult to follow one stream of the story. For example, the document compilation published by Bishop Aleskii (Dorodnitsyn) reproduced government correspondence only from the Khortitsa colony; yet, documents pertaining to the initial break in the colony are scarce in the Khortitsa case, but abundant for the Molochna colony.

My inability to decipher handwritten nineteenth-century German also contributed to gaps in my research. Mennonite communities communicated with the Guardian Committee in German, creating a large body of documents written in the gothic script. Nonetheless, Aleksii's reproduction of documents from the Khortista archives helped to fill this gap by offering the local point of view, and the wealth and variety of other sources available allowed for a nuanced treatment of schism.

Chapter one provides background information on the Mennonite schism and explores how the schism reflected the changing boundaries of religious, social and political organization in the colonies. In particular, this chapter focuses on the complications that arose because of the overlap between Mennonite civil and religious jurisdictions. An examination of how the Brethren and the larger community negotiated the split reveals a deep divergence of opinion over access to religious and civil rights in the colonies and over the parameters of acceptable spiritual behaviour. While Mennonites historically protected the autonomy of their communities from outside forces, the disruption created by the schism in Mennonite daily life caused both groups to look outside internal channels of dispute resolution to the Russian government.

The second chapter challenges the Mennonite historiographical approach that presents the schism as a primarily internal event and uncovers the Russian government's perspective on the religious rupture in the Mennonite communities. The Mennonite Brethren's transgression of gender, ethnic and spatial boundaries concerned the government; however, different levels of government proposed competing solutions to these issues. The reaction of these various governmental bodies illustrates a factor affecting the treatment of religious minority faiths previously under-acknowledged by the

academic literature. Each government agency interpreted the significance of the schism differently, which led to a haphazard approach to resolving tensions in the Mennonite community and to normalizing the Brethren's relationship to the state.

The third chapter places the Mennonite schism in the broader historiographical debates on religious minority groups in the empire and the Russian government's policy of religious toleration. Recent Russian scholarship has proposed several models describing the over-arching principles that shaped the tsarist state's treatment of religious minority groups between the late eighteenth and early twentieth century. These models have tended to explore Russia's religious policy from the perspective of the state– attempting to identify the over-arching principles guiding the state's treatment of its religious minorities. In general, these models differ in the emphasis they place on the strength of ideological versus pragmatic impetus underlying the government's interpretation of religious toleration. The Mennonite schism offers a case study to test the relevance of these theories to Russia's borderlands during a period of state-driven reform.

Chapter One: Secession & Reaction: The Mennonite Community Splinters

On 6 January 1860 a group of 16 Mennonites from the Molochna colony presented the church council with their intention to secede. The signatories asserted that Mennonites in Russia had deviated from their true spiritual path. The laity's disregard for both Mennonite doctrine and church discipline, along with the absence of responsible church leadership to curb the depravity of Mennonite colonists made it impossible for them to continue to worship and participate in religious ceremonies in their churches. To justify their decision to secede, the Brethren cited the father of the Mennonite faith, Menno Simons, and his support of the principle enunciated in 1 Corinthians 5:11: "But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not eat."[27] Abiding by these words, the Brethren began to celebrate communion in private homes, administered without the guidance of a minister. As the self-proclaimed true followers of Menno Simons, these men claimed the right to build their own church congregation, form their own church leadership and renounce ties to the established Mennonite churches.

This split within the established Mennonite churches raised difficult questions for Mennonites and the Russian government about how to define membership in the Mennonite Brotherhood; about the relationship between secular and religious bodies and their respective jurisdictions in the colonies; about the role of the laity in religious ceremonies; and about the meaning of religious toleration in the empire. As the

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[27] John B.Toews,ed., *The Story of the Early Mennonite Brethren: Reflections of a Lutheran Churchman* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2002), 20.

established churches and the secessionists both claimed Mennonite colonial status, and the privileges, both religious and secular associated with that status, the question of who had the authority to define what constituted a "Mennonite" became of fundamental importance. By declaring their performance of rituals and ceremonies to be authentic expressions of the Mennonite faith, the Brethren challenged the role of the established church leadership in regulating religious life. As civil and religious jurisdictions substantially overlapped, the schism also challenged the ability of the Mennonite civil authorities to control social and religious change in their district.

An examination of how the Brethren and the larger community negotiated the split reveals a deep divergence of opinion over the parameters of acceptable spiritual behaviour and the relationship between religious and civil rights in the colonies. According to the religious and civil authorities, the Brethren's assertive adoption of their own communion and baptismal practices, their engagement in proselytizing and their relationship with other religious denominations such as the Baptists defied the religious and social norms of Mennonite society. This defiance deserved a suspension of not only the religious, but also the civil rights of the secessionists, as demonstrated by the refusal of the Mennonite authorities to recognize marriages performed by the Brethren. In rebuttal, the Brethren argued for a broader and more spirited role for the laity in religious worship and constructed their religious practice to accommodate this participatory vision. Both sides presented an understanding of Mennonite religious identity that excluded the other group; however, the Brethren proposed to separate civil and religious categories, so that religious affiliation would not affect access to social and economic rights within the community.

Shared Power: Mennonite Civil and Religious Structures

Several notable changes accompanied the relocation of Mennonites from Prussia to New Russia. One of the most important was the establishment of a civil structure to govern the local Mennonite population. In Prussia, Mennonites shunned civil participation and religious leaders represented the interests of Mennonite communities to civil authorities. Mennonites believed that separation from the broader society and an emphasis on religious fellowship would sustain a distinct identity. In Russia, this option was not available. The Russian government settled Mennonites into ethnically homogenous villages and colonies and imposed a structure of self-governance thereby establishing an indigenous tradition of Mennonite civil leadership.[28]

Mennonite community life revolved around the church. Aspiring to create a society where Christian principles permeated all aspects of life, Mennonite religious leaders held important positions in the community.[29] At the top of the religious hierarchy was the position of Ältester (elder). The elder's responsibilities included "the general oversight, direction and leadership of the congregation" as well as performing core spiritual ceremonies such as communion and baptism.[30] The elder also maintained church records and, when required, administered punishments for religious violations. Aiding the elder in his duties were the ministers. Preaching was a minister's primary duty, but he also helped the elder with protecting the spiritual health of the congregation. The male members of the congregation elected both types of leader from the laity. Once elected, the chosen individual served in that position for life.

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[28] John Friesen, "Mennonite Churches and Religious Developments in Russia 1789-1850"in *Mennonites in Russia*. ed., John Friesen (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 58.
[29]Friesen, *Mennonites in Russia*, 58.
[30] Ibid, 44.

The absence of a strong religious hierarchical structure created difficulties for Mennonite religious leaders trying to offer a unified vision of Mennonite doctrine and to identify aberrations in doctrinal interpretations. Each congregation retained its independent status from the others, and only an informal council existed to discuss issues of importance among the congregations. In 1850, the Guardian Committee pragmatically ordered the Mennonite Molochna colony to address a wave of religious leadership issues the colony had recently experienced. The Mennonite religious leadership did not accept this directive by the Committee passively. It took over a year for the Mennonites to comply; however, in 1851, the colony officially created an administrative religious body with the mandate to settle religious disputes within the colony.[31] The powers of the new council, however, were limited. It could only involve itself in the affairs of congregations when a disagreement threatened the order and stability of the colony or when a congregation appealed to the council for help.[32]

The Russian government's initiative to create a hierarchical structure of administration similar to that of the Orthodox Church mirrored its program in other religious minority communities. In 1769, the government provided the Roman Catholics in the empire with "Spiritual Regulations" and nearly sixty years later, presented the Evangelical Lutheran and Reformed Churches with similar statutes.[33] These statutes incorporated the ecclesiastical structure of foreign faiths into Russia's administrative system, thereby fulfilling two primary goals of the government: "to regulate the affairs of each confession by defining its rights and obligations" and "to strengthen officially

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[31] James Urry, *None but Saints: Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hypersion Press Limited, 1989),174.
[32] Ibid., 175.
[33] Paul Werth, "Schism Once Removed: Sects, State Authority, and Meanings of Religious Toleration in Imperial Russia" in *Imperial Rule* Ed. Alexei Miller & Alfred J, Rieber (New York: CEU Press, 2004), 85.

sanctioned forms of religion and spiritual leaders, thereby preventing the emergence of unauthorized popular forms of religiosity."[34] Therefore, the government's policy of religious toleration included an element of monitoring spiritual changes in its tolerated faiths and ensuring that followers of these faiths continued to practise only approved forms of spiritual rituals. This regulation of spiritual life illustrates both the ideological commitment of the government to promoting the 'orthodox practice' of minority faiths and its pragmatic goal of maintaining control over the development of its minority religious by incorporating their ecclesiastical structures into the broader Russian bureaucracy. While the Russian government did not issue the Mennonites colonies a statute, it took the first step in creating a Mennonite religious hierarchy, with which it could communicate about religious matters.

Balancing the weakness of the ecclesiastical structure in Mennonite communities was the strength of the Mennonite civil administration. Local government was two-tiered; each colony was part of a larger district which formed a unit of government with a district office and a district assembly, and each village administrative unit consisted of a village office and a village assembly.[35] The village assembly was in charge of local matters including the election of the village and district officials.[36] The village office consisted of a mayor, two assistants, and a clerk. They were responsible for taxation, maintaining roads and safeguarding the order and stability of the village. The mayor also represented the village at district meetings. The district office consisted of a district mayor and two assistants. Under this system, Mennonite civil authorities closely regulated daily life and

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Mennonite settlements of Molochna and Khortitsa were their own district.
[36] David Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia: A Sketch of its Founding and Endurance, 1789-1919" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* xlvii (October 1973), 132.

had a strong influence over local social, economic and religious interactions within and between villages.[37]

The district office reported to the Office of the Guardian Committee of New Russian Foreign Colonists.[38] The Guardian Committee employed inspectors to supervise and report on primarily the economic, but also the social, development of the colonies. Problems that could not be solved locally were sent to the Guardian Committee for resolution. The Guardian Committee reported to the Governor-General of New Russia and one of a series of central administrative bodies in the Russian government.[39] From the beginning of the colonization movement in the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, the central administrative body in charge of the colonial administration in New Russia changed twice. During the period of the Mennonite schism, the Ministry in charge changed from the Ministry of State Domains (1837-1866) to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (1866-1871). In the case of the Mennonite schism, all levels of government became involved.

A spirit of competition and co-operation permeated the relationship between the civil and religious authorities in the Mennonite colonies throughout the nineteenth century. During the early years of Mennonite settlement, religious leaders occupied a higher standing in the community and therefore held greater influence in not only moral, but also in social matters. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the power of civil authorities over daily life in Mennonite villages strengthened as the Mennonite civil administrative system grew in stature. Nicholas I's commitment to expand the economic

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[37] Friesen, *Mennonites in Russia,* 49.
[38] This body was initially called the Guardianship Committee for Foreign Settlers. Its name was changed to the Guardian Committee, although its function stayed the same.
[39] Curt Rohland, *Russian Colonial Administration and Mennonite Colonies in New Russia from Catherine II to 1871* (M.A thesis., University of Kansas, 1964), 58.

activities of the peasantry during the 1830s-1840s saw the introduction of new administrative bodies to facilitate economic reform in the countryside.[40] In addition to the creation of a national body to address the economic welfare of the state peasantry, the Ministry of State Domains, the Russian government, through the Guardians Committee, also formed a local body in the Molochna colony in 1836, the Agricultural Society, to reform Mennonite economic activities. Under the leadership of Johann Cornies, the lifetime Chair of the Agricultural Society, this organization wielded enormous power to shape agricultural practices in the colony, which in turn, ushered profound social changes into Mennonite village. For instance, the formation of Neuhalbstadt, a "craftsmen's village", created opportunities for landless Mennonite tradesmen and craftsmen to achieve relative prosperity in the colony which allowed for the growth of a new social group of Mennonites and also established Neuhalbstadt as a "commercial and industrial centre."[41]

At times, the prominent role of the Agricultural Society in shaping the economic and social transformation of the Mennonite colonies placed it in competition with the congregational structure of authorities. The "Warkentin Affair" demonstrated the increasing tension between secular and religious authorities to establish the parameters of their jurisdiction and the readiness of the Russian government to support civil officials in cases of disagreement.[42] At its most basic level, the dispute involved a competition between Johann Cornies, and the elder of the Large Flemish Congregation, Jacob Warkentin, over whose candidate should fill the district mayor position in the Molochna

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[40] John Staples, "Religion, Politics, and the Mennonite Privilegium in Early Nineteenth Century Russia" *The Journal of Mennonite Studies* 21 (2003), 79.
[41] John Staples, *Cross- Cultural Encounters on the Ukrainian Steppes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 126.
[42] Staples, 184.

colony. Both sides accused the other of inappropriate tactics during a number of elections for the position. In the end, Evgenii von Hahn, the head of the Guardian Committee, removed Warkentin from his position for "meddling in official matters" and dismantled his congregation into three separate parts.[43]

Congregational influence in village and colony affairs did not disappear after the Warkentin incident, but it was altered slightly. The Russian government's interference into Mennonite religious life through the removal of Warkentin showed its willingness to support civil Mennonite authorities in disagreements between the two parties.[44] As both claimed legitimacy in protecting and cultivating a "Mennonite identity,"– an identity that combined moral, social and economic practices – the potential for competition between and within the groups was high. Yet, this common goal could also foster cooperation. In the case of the Mennonite schism, as religious authorities could not find a consensus among themselves as to the most prudent course of action, they sought out Mennonite civil leadership to help set the agenda for addressing the growth of the Brethren movement.

Demands, Threats and Dissonance: The Appearance and Consolidation of the Brethren Movement

The church council was the first institution to respond to the schism. After it received the Brethren's declaration of secession, the church council called a meeting to discuss its response to the sectarians' demand to form their own church. The Mennonite leadership reacted to the secessionists' demands by seeking to suppress the movement. At the 18 January meeting, the council ruled that they could not condone the formation of a

[43] Staples, "Religion, Politics", 83.
[44] Staples, "Religion, Politics", 85.

new church by the Brethren. Since the Brethren refused to return to their churches, the council decided to pass the case on to the district office.[45] This request, signed by only five out of the six elders, quickly handed decision-making power on the issue over to the civil authorities. Only one dissenting elder, Bernhard Fast of the Ohrloff-Halbstadt church, refused to support the council's declaration.

The decision by the council to request assistance from the civil authorities demonstrated the swiftness by which the schism changed from a religious dispute to a civil-religious issue. For many groups in New Russia, civil and religious jurisdictions overlapped, as the Russian government intentionally settled foreign colonists in ethnically homogeneous communities.[46] In the case of the Mennonites, belonging to the church was a prerequisite for membership in the community, and, therefore, excommunication from the church entailed shunning in secular, as well as sacred life. In this way, religious disputes threatened to have far-reaching consequences for individuals beyond repercussions from church authorities. In the case of the 1860s Mennonite schism, the excommunication of the Brethren by the church elders affected not only their religious life, but also their economic and social participation in the village.[47] The treatment of the Brethren differed depending on the congregation to which they belonged.[48] Certain congregations treated the Brethren with leniency, while others responded forcefully. In more extreme cases, friends and relatives of the excommunicated person could not visit and in the case where they lived in the same house, they could not speak with him or

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[45] Jacob Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest, 1979), 49.
[46] Staples, 23.
[47] "Eine Sekt" *Odessaer Zeitung*, January 17, 1864, 51.
[48] Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, trans. J.B. Toews, A. Friesen et al. (Fresno, Calif., 1978), 229.

her.[49] Therefore, even though excommunication was a religious punishment, it also could nullify the social and economic rights of the excommunicated in the village.

Despite being inextricably linked, the difference between acceptable forms of civil punishment versus appropriate forms of religious sanctions was problematic in Mennonite communities. Admission of guilt and repentance were the primary purposes of religious punishments. Civil officials did not necessary view the aim of punishment to be the loving reconciliation and reintegration of the offender. Religious leaders felt that "many official sanctions, including forms of punishment, contradicted Mennonite principles of faith and [therefore] were not recognized by some congregational leaders."[50] In cases that straddled the line between religious and civil jurisdiction, agreement on a fitting punishment could be difficult to negotiate.

In the case of the Mennonite schism, the district office quickly employed its powers as the civil authority of the colony to curtail the activities of the Brethren. It branded the Brethren movement a secret society and used Article 362 "About Secret Societies" to stop the Brethren from holding meeting in their homes.[51] The article, promulgated in 1857, allowed the government to imprison "the founders and heads of secret societies, which, although they may not have subversive objectives, are nevertheless forbidden..."[52]A circular sent from the district office instructed village mayors to disband any religious meetings taking place in private homes and to hand the offenders over to the district office.

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[49] "Eine Sekt" *Odessaer Zeitung,* January 17, 1864, 51.
[50] James Urry, "The Social Background to the Emergence of the Mennonite Brethren in 19th- century Russia," *The Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6 (1988), 17.
[51] Friesen, 249.
[52] Ibid.

Threats from the council and the involvement of Mennonite civil authorities failed to alleviate this conflict in the colony. The story of the Brethren's spiritual awakening or degradation, depending on which side one believes, made its way into German-language newspapers such as Odessaer Zeitung. The exchanges in this paper revealed the conflicting views among Mennonites over the nature of the schism and its meaning for Mennonite communities. At the heart of the issue was a difference of interpretation of Mennonite rituals and beliefs. In the eyes of many members of the established churches, the activities of the Brethren represented misdirected piety and a deviation from Mennonite principles. They did not question the sincerity of the Brethren's beliefs, only the soundness of the biblical basis for their actions.

The Brethren initiated a number of variations on the rituals followed by the established Mennonite churches in Russia, which they felt more closely corresponded to Menno Simons's teaching and early Christian traditions. Armed with a new appreciation of and dedication to achieving salvation, the Brethren emphasized the sacraments of communion and baptism as key portals to redemption. They envisioned a community of true believers, where all members would commit themselves to living a Godly life. Their inability to create this community within the pre-existing Mennonite religious structure caused the schism. Unconvinced of the piety of the Mennonite congregations, a few members questioned the commitment of the Mennonite churches to uphold their faith and requested to take communion apart from the larger congregation. Their desire to emulate the practices of the early church also caused them to desire to take communion more often.[53] The ministers refused to comply with this request. The Brethren reacted by holding communion and religious meetings in their homes without the presence of an

[53] Ibid., 228.

ordained minister. The churches admonished them for their actions, after which the Brethren seceded and continued to conduct their own religious services outside of the church.

In addition to their refusal to celebrate communion with their home congregations, the Brethren also practised a different form of worship. As a complaint to the Guardian Committee described:

> In our church [the established churches] there is a church service, where everyone through singing, prayer and preaching the Word, celebrates but only one person speaks, following Apostle Paul's admonishments, although sometimes two or three speak. The sectarians hold their service where all speak and one after another prays and while they are speaking and praying, others call out loudly "Gloria", "Halleluiah" and laugh. When the hour of the church service is finished, there rises a cry from the group along with jumping and dancing. People who have witnessed this scene have compared it to a tavern. The Huepfer believe this is the work of the Holy Spirit.[54]

The exuberant approach of the Brethren to worship services caused controversy in Mennonite communities and was one of the main reasons cited by the local administrators for their displeasure with the movement. The Brethren's joyous worshipping of God differed significantly from the conservative expression of faith followed in most Mennonite congregations. For example, Mennonites celebrated communion sparingly and conducted the ceremony in the church. For those unable to attend due to illness, only by special permission from the elders could communion be taken in their homes. The church elders deemed the Brethren's desire to take communion more often as arrogant and criticized the Brethren movement for singing lively melodies while celebrating communion in private homes.[55]

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[54] "Eine Sekte" *Odessaer Zeitung*, March 18, 1864, 42.
[55] "Eine Sekte" *Odessaer Zeitung*, Jan 15, 1864, 43.

The Brethren's emphasis on the personal experience of faith created worship services that encouraged individuals to improvise their expressions of faith. The exuberance of Huepfer religious ceremonies, which involved singing and dancing, created a spectacle for the entire village to witness. [56] Participants in these events easily became swept up in the excitement of the moment. An excerpt from Jacob Bekker's 1861 letter recalling the baptism of Jakob Reimer illustrates this collective exhilaration:

> Sunday we were so lively [in Jakob Reimer's home in Gnadenfeld] that the brethren leaped and danced, while we were near the water [where Jakob Reimer, the owner of the house was baptized]...On Tuesday evening before Pentecost…we sang outside before the door, giving thanks and shouting for joy with one another. And the world shouted back at us… [They] gathered at the street fence to listen… W. Bartel went out to preach the gospel to them. [57]

The enthusiasm of the Brethren's religious services and their indiscriminate attitude toward appropriate locations for their worship of God differed from the established churches, which restricted God's glorification primarily to within church buildings.

Conflict over the proper method of baptism also constituted an issue of contention between the established churches and the Mennonite Brethren. Traditionally, Mennonite baptismal ceremonies took place inside the church building after the candidate had completed catechism and received approval from the elder.[58] At the ceremony, an elder would pour water over the candidate's head to seal the covenant between God and the baptismal candidate. For Mennonites, baptism symbolized a commitment to both God and the congregation to lead a faith-inspired life. Baptism also signified the entrance of

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[56] The Froehliche Richtung (Exuberance Movement) led to a spiritual crisis in the early Mennonite Brethren church. Five years after their break from the Mennonite church, some members questioned the enthusiasm of their ceremonies. After the June Reforms in 1865, musical instruments such as the drum were banned. Although the tone of their worship services became more somber, immersion baptism continued and the Brethren continued to use public spaces for worship purposes. See Friesen, 262-278.

[57] Friesen, 266.

[58] Franz Nickel, "Meine Geschichte," *Zions-Bote*, no. 6 (1891), 2.

the believer into a community of believers, which permitted him or her participation in the sacrament of communion.

In light of their criticism of the spiritual health of the established churches, the secessionists questioned whether they truly had been saved through their baptisms in their old churches. After investigating the issue, the Brethren decided that their baptisms were not scripturally accurate. The first re-baptism of Mennonite members took place on 23 September 1860, when Jacob Bekker and Heinrich Bartel baptized each other.[59] Mennonite Brethren leader Jacob Bekker recalled in his memoirs his re-baptism and the reasons that led him to this decision.[60] After studying Jesus' baptism in the book of Mark, and Baptist pamphlets on the theological debate about the baptismal ceremony, Bekker concluded that immersion was the proper method of baptism.[61] Notably, Bekker expressed an initial fear that since none of the Mennonite churches in Russia practised immersion baptism, the Russian government might interpret their action as the formation of a "new religious society", which by law the government did not permit.[62] After a discussion with members of his congregation, in which they expressed support for immersion baptism, Bekker and Bartel rode to a river in the Molochna settlement. After a prayer, they entered the water and took turns submerging the other in baptism.[63]

The local mayor responded to the event by summoning Jacob Bekker for a hearing. Unable to convince Bekker of the folly of this new form of baptism, the mayor passed the case on to a district official. According to Bekker, the official verbally reprimanded him, saying, "I forbid you, in all seriousness, to dare perform any act of a

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[59] Friesen, 284.
[60] Bekker, 71- 72.
[61] Ibid., 71.
[62] Ibid., 72.
[63] Ibid., 73.

spiritual nature in the future."[64] Heedless of the official's admonition, within a few days Bekker participated in another immersion baptism in the Molochna colony.[65]

After arriving at the same conclusion as their Molochna Brethren – that immersion represented the only legitimate form of baptism – the Khortitsa Brethren travelled to Molochna to confirm their faith. Gerhard Wieler baptized Abram Unger and Heinrich Neufeld in March 1862.[66] Wieler performed the ceremony in the Tokmak river.[67] Unger and Neufeld travelled home and, on a spring day, with the ice still lingering on the Dnieper river, they baptized eighteen people from the villages of Kronsweide and Einlage. As the Brethren conducted their ceremonies in public spaces, anyone passing by was free to watch, and in certain cases, onlookers disrupted these baptisms by chasing the baptismal candidates out of the water with sticks. Aron Lepp and his wife's first attempt at baptism was interrupted in this way.[68] When this happened, the Brethren simply found another body of water and performed the ceremony.

By 1863 in the Khortitsa colony, and 1864 in the Molochna settlement, the Mennonite Brethren required all members to be baptized by immersion. An article in the Odessaer Zeitung reported with horror the insistence that all people, even the elderly, wishing to join the Huepfer descend into the river to be baptized.[69] As the Mennonite Brethren believed their first baptism in the old church was based on a faulty spirituality, salvation could only be achieved after their re-birth into the true faith. To be submerged in water symbolized to die like Christ and to re-emerge symbolized the baptismal

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[64] Ibid., 74.
[65] Ibid., 75.
[66] Heinrich Epp *Notizen aus dem Leben und Wirken des verstorbenen Aeltesten Abraham Unger dem Gründer der Einlage-Mennoniten-Brüdermeinde* (Halbstadt, 1907), 8.
[67] Aleksii (Dorodnitsyn) *Materialy dlia istorii religiozno-ratsionalisticheskogo dvizheniia na iuge Rossii vo vtoroi polovine 19-go st.* (Kazan': Tsentral'naia tipografiia, 1908), 27.
[68] Friesen, 290.
[69] "Eine Sekt" *Odessaer Zeitung,* January 15, 1864, 43.

candidate's re-birth. The Brethren expressed the importance of this rebirth in their founding document:

> We confess a baptism on faith, as a seal of faith; not on a memorized faith, as is the practice, but on a genuine, loving faith effected by the Spirit of God. For without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrew 11:6). And he that hath not the Spirit of Christ, is none of His (Romans 8:9). And again our dear Saviour says to Nicodemus, John 3:3: Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Baptism is not the new birth, as some of the unconverted maintain, but serves as a sign for the baptismal candidate that he is really born again.[70]

Therefore, without immersion baptism, believers could not receive communion within the Mennonite Brethren community.[71]

The renunciation by the Brethren of the authority of elected elders and ministers from the established Mennonite church and the formation of their own exclusive religious community created complications in the colony's civil affairs. Russian imperial legislation considered marriage to be a sacred, as opposed to secular institution. The Russian government assigned the task of recording births, marriages, and deaths to the clergy from the empire's recognized religions. Therefore, although the Brethren's own elected ministers performed marriage ceremonies for their believers, they relied on the broader Mennonite community to execute the administrative task of recording the marriages for them. Both the district office and the church elders refused to recognize the marriages. In reaction to the Brethren's marriages, the district office ordered "the village offices not to recognize these marriages as valid or in any way to view the persons living in this kind of unchastity as a family."[72] The church elders also refused to recognize the

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[70] Friesen, 231.
[71] Ibid., 290.
[72] Ibid., 258.

marriages performed by the Mennonite Brethren church leadership.[73] The church elders claimed:

> According to our apostolic church order, only the ordained elders are authorized to administer the holy sacraments; marriage can also be legally performed only by properly appointed ministers. Since the secessionists have neither a church-ordained elder nor a properly appointed minister, and since they absolutely refuse to tie the teaching ministry of the church and the administration of the sacraments to an ecclesiastical office, but on the contrary have every member who feels called to do so administer these ordinances… therefore, according to the rules of our church, we can neither condone nor recognize as legal such unauthorized practices of theirs as baptism, communion and marriage. [74]

The Brethren countered the elders by arguing that they performed marriage ceremonies according to the Mennonite confession of faith and, therefore, their marriages were legal.[75] Nonetheless, the village offices regarded children born to parents married by the Brethren as illegitimate, and recorded them under their mother's maiden name.

The proselytizing activities of the Brethren caused friction in the community, as the Brethren indiscriminately attempted to convert Mennonites and non-Mennonites to their movement. According to the diary of Jacob Epp, a Mennonite minister, the Brethren freely expressed their joy at finding salvation and their judgment that Mennonites who had not converted would never achieve this state. Epp recalled a conversation with David Redekopp, a convert to the Brethren, in which Redekopp declared, "that no one in [the established churches] would find salvation without leaving it."[76] As the Brethren actively sought to be bearers of deliverance from decadence and greed, the established churches fought to guard their flock from the Brethren's version of salvation. The Brethren

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[73] "Eine Sekte" *Odessaer Zeitung*, January, 15 1864, 43.
[74] Friesen, 256.
[75] Ibid., 408.
[76] Harvey Dyck, (trans. and ed.) *A Mennonite in Russia: The Diaries of Jacob D Epp, 1851-1880* (Toronto, 1991), 165

emphasized the act of conversion as central to their salvation theology. For many in the Brethren movement, "conversion...constituted a dramatic, unforgettable experience bringing ultimate meaning to their lives."[77] Epp, through his position in the community as a minister, defended the established churches' theological position that de-emphasized the emotionalism of the Brethren's approach to salvation. An entry from his diary illustrates Epp's labour to fortify the faith of wavering believers against the Brethren's teaching:

> This morning my cousin D. Klassen and I drove to Kamianka to talk to his mother (Johann Wieler's widow) and the widow of Jacob Wiebe. We had heard that a prominent member of the new sect, Pet. Berg, and Aron Lepp had spoken to them about joining the new sect. I explained that salvation could be found only in the name of Jesus Christ and that no sect could help them in this regard. I urged them to seize hold of the Lord Jesus strongly in faith and not let themselves be led astray by individuals. I said other things in this vein, as well as I could, and they replied that they wanted to stay in our church.[78]

Epp's ministry to these women showed his commitment to preventing the spread of the Brethren's beliefs and his personal conviction that the teachings of the secessionists would not bring Mennonites closer to salvation.

On the periphery of the Russian empire, proselytizing was not solely a male pursuit. Women in the Brethren actively participated in the spiritual life of the new movement. The Molochna Council of elders complained that "even the female members speak in their meetings and pray aloud..." which they regarded as contrary to scriptural teaching.[79] This religious movement that challenged the authority of the Mennonite ecclesiastical officials to define acceptable spiritual practices, and that encouraged the active participation of the laity in expressing personal faith, also supported women, as

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[77] John B. Toews, "Patterns of Piety among the Early Brethren (1860-1990) *Journal of Mennonite Studies*. 12 (1994), 150
[78] Dyck, 173.
[79] Friesen, 256.

sisters in Christ, to share their faith publicly. Although the leadership of the Brethren was firmly male, women participated in smaller, yet significant ways. Helena Heinrichs' description of her conversion included reference to a visit from converted men and women, whom she allowed to sing and pray in her home.[80] After the event, "I spoke to my friends about this experience, but they advised us [her and her husband] not to participate or else we would become part of the wrong path."[81] Dismissive of their warnings, Heinrichs eventually joined the movement. Similar examples from other evangelical movements in Russia at the time reveal how women through their domestic roles helped to spread the evangelical movement. For instance, Sister Brandtmann travelled to the town where her husband was imprisoned for his beliefs.[82] After visiting him, she engaged her billets in conversion and spoke with them about her faith. Word spread quickly through the village about her testimony and others, interested in the new faith, came to visit her. The village officials also became aware of her activities and they raided the house where she stayed, confiscating the many tracts and missions papers in her possession. After arresting her for proselytizing, they sent her to the same jail as her husband. The examples of Heinrichs and Brandtmann illustrate the role of women as spiritual emissaries in the evangelical movement. This active role for women at the beginning of the Brethren movement parallels other religious movements such as the Methodists in England. In the English context, women preachers multiplied during the

[80] Helena Heinricks, "Meine Erfahrungen," *Zion-Bote* no.5 (1895), 2.
[81] Ibid, 2.
[82] *Missionsblatt* 19, (March 1861), 37

popular evangelicalism phase of the movement, and declined as the church institutionalized in the 1850s.[83]

Tensions continued to erupt throughout the 1860s over the participation of the laity in spiritual counselling and the right of Mennonites, regardless of religious persuasion, to use public spaces for religious expression. For example, in early January 1863, the mayor of the Mennonite village of Libenau complained to the district office that the Brethren continued to engage in disruptive behaviour at church services in his village and in Wernersdorf. According to his complaint, the Brethren, specifically Johann Claassen, attended the church service only to challenge the substance of the sermon by preaching his own views about salvation after the service.[84] The mayor asked the district office to "prohibit Claassen from carrying out said disruptions, in order that we are no longer to be disturbed in our worship service by Claassen or other persons belonging to his sect."[85] The district office responded to the request by questioning Claassen about his activities. The questions posed by the district office made clear that the civil authorities interpreted Claassen's actions as flagrantly violating religious norms, which in turn destabilized the Mennonite community structure. For example, the district official questioned Claassen's legitimacy to preach without an official position in the community as a minister or spiritual leader.[86] Claassen responded by protesting the mayor's and authorities' characterization of his actions as disruptive. He claimed that he had asked and received permission from the ministers to speak after the service had ended.[87]

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[83] Deborah M. Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 11.
[84] August Lenzmann "Die Separatistischen Bewegungen an der Molotschna Betreffend" *Mennonitische Blaetter*, (April 1863),34.
[85] Friesen, 398. [Friesen reproduced a report by the mayor of Liebenau about this conflict.]
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

Claassen also defended his right to speak critically about the ministers. Mennonite tradition, according to Claassen, required members of the community to support a minister, but only if he served the community properly. If a minister did not lead by example and provide the community with guidance, then community members had the right to admonish and refuse to follow him.[88] This example illustrates competing interpretations of Mennonite past tradition on the appropriate role of the laity in the spiritual leadership of the community. Whereas the established churches believed that ordained ministers, through their position, held authority over spiritual matters in the community, the Brethren countered by arguing that all community members had an obligation to supervise the spiritual health of the church.

Isolated from their former co-religionists, the Brethren formed a fraternal relationship with the Baptists. The Baptists, an evangelical denomination that emphasized biblical authority and personal faith while shunning a hierarchical understanding of church leadership, appeared in imperial Russia during the beginning of the nineteenth century. The movement spread from continental Europe into the northwestern and southern regions of the Russian empire through the missions work of German-speaking Baptists.[89] A shared linguistic background combined with the relatively close geographical proximity of Hamburg allowed Baptist literature to flow easily into Mennonite communities. Early Mennonite Brethren leaders, such as Abram Unger and Jacob Bekker, recorded the influence of Baptist missionary leaflets on their understanding of baptism. In fact, Unger wrote to J.G Oncken, the founder of the German Baptist movement in the German lands, to ask why the issue of baptism featured so

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[88] Friesen, 399.
[89] William Wagner, *New Move Forward in Europe: Growth Patterns of German Speaking Baptists in Europe.*(South Pasadena, Calif: Willian Carey Library, 1978), 106.

prominently in Baptist pamphlets.[90] The Baptists' concern with the proper form of baptism helped to inspire Brethren in Khortitsa and Molochna to question the Mennonites' tradition. Although in agreement on the issue of baptism, doctrinal differences existed between the Brethren and the Baptists. They disagreed on the issues of military service and footwashing, with the Brethren in support of the latter and against the former, whereas the Baptists believed the opposite.[91] These differences prevented unification, but did not initially hinder fellowship between the movements. [92]

The Mennonite Brethren not only received Baptist literature and corresponded with Baptist leaders, they also formed close personal relationships with Baptists in Russia and abroad. In the mid-1860s, the Brethren relied on the Baptists to help them establish a working congregational structure. The relatively close proximity of the Baptists in Hamburg made it possible for Baptist leaders to visit and minister to spiritual brethren in the Russian empire. For example, August Liebig travelled to Khortitsa to aid the inchoate Mennonite Brethren church in creating an ecclesiastical structure to help the congregation resolve conflict within its membership. His help, although highly appreciated by the Brethren, was short-lived. Two weeks after his arrival, the Mennonite authorities ensured that he was arrested and sent back to Hamburg.[93] In 1869, Baptist leader J.C Oncken travelled from Hamburg through Southern Russia, visiting many Mennonite and Lutheran villages to preach.[94] Originally, he intended to visit the Khortitsa and Molochna colonies;

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[90] Epp, 7.
[91] Friesen, 288.
[92] For more information on this relationship see Albert Wardin, Jr, "Mennonite Brethren and German Baptists in Russia: Affinities and Dissimilarities" in *Mennonites and Baptists: A Continuing Conversation* ed. Paul Toews (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1993), 97-112.
[93] S.D Bondar, *Sekta mennonitov v' rossii; v sviazi s istorii niemetskoi kolonizatzii na iuge rossii: ocherk.* (Petrograd Tipografiia V.D Smirnova, 1916), 151.
[94] J Oncken "Letters from Oncken in Russia" *Quarterly Reporter*, January 1870, 804.

however, bad weather forced him to skip his trip to Molochna. He did manage to ordain the Mennonite Brethren leader Abram Unger.

The Mennonite Brethren also established relationships with German Baptists living in Russia. For example, colonists from the Lutheran villages of Alt- and Neu-Danzig in Kherson province travelled to the Mennonite village of Einlage to hear about the Brethren movement.[95] A fellowship formed between these groups, and soon after the believers from Kherson province completed their spiritual renewal through baptism. Although the former Lutherans formed their own congregation, and eventually founded one of the early German Baptist churches in Ukraine, they remained in contact with the Mennonite Brethren.[96]

Nonetheless, relations between Mennonites and Baptists were not always beneficial. [97] Johann Pritzkau, who became an elder in the Alt-Danzig Baptist church recalled his journey to Einlage to learn about the teaching and organizational foundation of the Mennonite Brethren church. Instead of a well-functioning, healthy church, Pritzkau wrote that he found a group torn apart by disagreement.[98] Convinced that he would not find spiritual guidance from the Mennonite Brethren, he wrote to Oncken and after receiving a positive response, commenced on a journey to Hamburg, where he worked as a member of the Baptist church.[99]

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[95] Friesen, 327.

[96] The influence of the Mennonite Brethren on the early German Baptist movement in Ukraine has not been properly explored. Unsurprisingly, as the established churches emphasized the connection between the German Baptists from the German lands and the Brethren in order to discredit the movement, scholarship has tended to focus primarily on this relationship. Yet, if we analyze the Huepfer movement as somewhat crossing religious lines (as the Russia government did), this would allow for a deeper understanding of the cross-fertilization happening between these groups, in particular the role of the early Brethren in shaping the evangelical movement in Southern Ukraine.

[97] J. Pritzkau, *Geschichte der Baptisten in Sud-Russland* (Odessa, 1914),43.

[98] Ibid, 43.

[99] Ibid, 44-45.

The broader Mennonite community viewed the relationship between the Mennonite Brethren and the Baptists as objectionable. In the eyes of the Mennonites, cooperation between the Mennonite Brethren and other evangelical groups, especially of the Khortitsa Brethren with German Baptists, discredited the association of the Brethren's religious beliefs and practices with the Mennonite faith. Specifically, the performance of immersion baptism drew unflattering comparisons to the Baptists and intimations of the Brethren movement's illegitimacy. As an article in Odessaer Zeitung suggested:

> The Brethren may conduct their own religious practices, but they will always be a torn cloth from the whole and the world will not recognize them nor be concerned about them. The government and those people who live in Russia will not take notice of these small, powerless people, who are connecting themselves to and modeling themselves after the Baptists.[100]

Over the next few years, the Brethren struggled to defend their colonial status as Mennonites while continuing to share fellowship with the Baptists. As the Baptists were an unrecognized confession in the Russian empire until 1879, cooperation between the groups posed potential difficulties for the Brethren. The established church used this relationship to argue that the Brethren's activities were un-Mennonite. Nonetheless, even while the Brethren continued to associate with the Baptists, they categorically declared themselves "Mennonite."

The firm commitment of each side to its position produced a stalemate in the Mennonite colonies. With community tensions still high, nearly two years after the split, the Molochna colony administrator, David Friesen, wrote the elders of the colony in October 1862 with a forceful ultimatum meant to settle the dispute: either exile the group from the colony or allow it to organize its own church. Friesen requested that the elders ask their congregations and report their decisions to him. The responses of the elders

[100] "Eine Sekte" *Odessaer Zeitung*, January 17, 1864, 51.

confirmed the controversial nature of this issue within the community. Most congregations would not support unconditionally the expulsion of the Brethren from the colony. For example, Elder Johann Friesen from Neukirch wrote to the district office, "...we are notifying you that, according to the Word of God, we cannot expel them from the colony. We do not wish to do this and do not wish to participate in the deeds of darkness."[101] Elder August Lenzmann from Gnadenfield, an instigator of the movement against the Brethren, communicated the disagreement in his parish over the issue of exile.[102] Only two out of eight congregations unequivocally supported the expulsion of the Brethren. But only one church, Ohrloff, supported the recognition of a separate church for the secessionists. After Johann Harder, the Ohrloff congregation's leader, corresponded with the Brethren about their confession of faith and was assured that the Brethren claimed to follow the same confession of faith as other Mennonite churches, he found no reason why the Ohrloff church could not recognize the Brethren's right to form an independent church.[103] The impasse created by the Mennonite discomfort with the finality of expulsion affected the types of legitimate actions that could be undertaken against the Brethren. Without overwhelming support for exile, Mennonite civil authorities understood the necessity of using caution when dealing with the Brethren.

The apprehension of religious leaders was mainly in regard to exile as such a severe solution to this conflict. Many of the church elders considered this response to be uncharitable and unreflective of Christian values. Instead, they hoped that eventually the Brethren would realize their mistake and re-enter church life. As Elders Benjamin

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[101] Toews, 53.
[102] Ibid., 53-54.
[103] John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Board of Christian Literature, 1975), 48.

Rayzlaff and Franz Goerz from Rudernerweide wrote, "Our parish has decided to admonish them once more and ask them to return to their former congregations."[104] Accompanying this sentiment among some ministers such as Jacob Epp, was the view that it was necessary to make improvements to the state of spirituality in the colony. As Epp wrote in his diary, "These people are deluded, but it seems to me unfair and unjust to persecute them in this way. One hopes that the movement might become a powerful voice rousing our church from its present drowsy stupor."[105] Despite the hopes of Mennonite religious leaders, neither reconciliation nor religious renewal happened.

Relocation and Informal Recognition: An Uneasy Resolution to Community Discord

The religious leaders may have talked about conciliation, but their actions forcefully communicated that reconciliation could only happen if the Brethren repudiated their faith. Unwilling to rejoin their old churches, the Brethren attempted to circumvent the local and regional authorities by pleading their case to the central government in St. Petersburg, in the hope that they would be allowed to retain their colonial status as Mennonites. As the controversy raged in Mennonite colonies over the existence of the Brethren, Johann Claassen clandestinely left in March 1860 and travelled to St. Petersburg to initiate the process leading to recognition from the Russian government. Claassen recounted in a letter that the decision to seek protection from the tsar was an act of desperation in reaction to their treatment from local religious and government representatives: "... I pondered our situation: if the authorities would not protect us...we

[104] Toews, 55.
[105] Dyck,166.

already knew what we could expect from the Mennonite congregations."[106] After staying only a few months, Claassen returned to the Molochna colony to help the Brethren elect their first religious leaders. [107] The newly formed congregation elected Jakob Bekker and Heinrich Huebert as their ministers at the end of May 1860. The established churches refused to recognize these elections as the ministers were not ordained by a Mennonite elder.

With an elected leadership structure in place, Claassen returned to St. Petersburg in November. Over the next year and a half, he worked through personal connections and governmental channels to secure recognition for the Brethren. His reliance on fellow religious believers reveals the eclectic religious atmosphere in St. Petersburg. For example, Claassen initially lived with a Baptist, Brother Plonus, and within a week of his arrival, he received indispensable advice from a pastor of the Moravian Brethren Church, Pastor Nielsen, for accomplishing the goal of his trip.[108] Pastor Nielsen warned Claassen and his associate Otto Forchhammer that they would need the support of the elders and leaders of the colony to establish an independent church. Without this support, they could lose their privileges. The only alternative way to keep their privileges would be to resettle in a separate colony. Claassen vigorously pursued the latter option. Through introductions by his associates, he gained access to the upper Russian governmental circles. In addition to exhibiting Claassen's personal perseverance, his experiences in St. Petersburg revealed the personalized nature of power and the difficulty of defining governmental jurisdiction

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[106] Friesen, 342.

[107] According to the memoirs of Jacob Bekker, on his first trip to St. Petersburg Claassen met with Privy Councilor Hahn, who advised the Brethren to create a leadership structure as soon as possible in order to legitimize their claim of being Mennonite. Yet, a document in P.M. Friesen's book indicate that Claassen only met with Hahn on his second visit to St. Petersburg. See Bekker 68; Friesen, 248.

[108] Friesen, 360.

in the empire. Claassen could essentially circumvent the local and regional governmental structure and appeal to a higher authority. In May 1862, Claassen reached the highest echelon of power with his petition to the tsar. In the petition, he appealed to tsar Alexander II for protection from Mennonite religious and civil authorities which had unlawfully persecuted the Brethren by taking away their civil rights and privileges.[109] Claassen also cited the unsympathetic activities of the Guardian Committee as furthering the injustices faced by the Brethren. According to Claassen, the Guardian Committee allowed the district office too much discretion in addressing the Mennonite schism and when it intervened, the Guardian Committee supported the district office's persecution of the Brethren.[110] Instead of acting as a neutral government body, the Guardian Committee willfully neglected to protect the new church, especially through its refusal to co-operate with other government bodies such as the Ministry of State Domains to resettle the Brethren on new land. After Claassen submitted his petition to the tsar, the imperial office forwarded the document to the Guardian Committee and requested information about Claassen's behaviour in the colony and the validity of his complaints.[111]

Claassen's decision to petition the tsar demonstrates the Brethren's reliance on a standard recourse against perceived injustice used throughout the empire by unsatisfied imperial subjects. Scholars have traditionally presented the performance of petitioning the tsar by the lower *sosloviia* (estate) as an act inspired by naïve monarchism. This example illustrates another explanation for petitioning within the empire. Beginning with the negotiation and recognition of their Privilegium, Mennonites developed a tradition of petitioning government officials to re-affirm their special set of rights. Scholars, such as

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[109] Ibid., 346.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Lenzmann, 34.

John Staples, have emphasized the "symbolic importance" of the Privilegium, as "it established that the Mennonites had the right to negotiate with the state."[112] As Mennonites sought the support of Russian officials rather frequently against their opponents in times of their disputes, Claassen's actions reflect a normal course of action. Not finding support from regional officials, Claassen sought help from a higher level of government.

The Brethren also discovered that they could receive assistance for their cause from other governmental bodies in the empire. By the 1860s, with the end of the Caucasian war, new opportunities for settlement in the Caucasus opened up. Through his work in St. Petersburg, Claassen managed to secure enough land from the Minister of War to relocate to the Caucasus.[113] The Mennonite Brethren received permission from the Ministry of State Domains to relocate to the Kuban province. Approximately one hundred families moved to the region and founded two settlements: Wohldemfurst and Alexanderfeld. In the Kuban region, after petitioning the Governor of Caucasus, Mikhail Vorontsov, the Brethren eventually received confirmation in May 1866 of their entitlement to "all those rights which the authorities have granted them in their current place of residence [New Russia]."[114] Therefore, the Mennonite Brethren faith was indirectly recognized by the Russian government as part of the Mennonite confession. Under this 'solution' the Russian state defined the established Mennonite churches and the Mennonite Brethren church as belonging to the same religious confession, even

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[112] Staples "Religion and Politics", 73.
[113] Friesen, 257.
[114] Toews, C.P, Heinrich Friesen & Arnold Dyck, *The Kuban Settlement* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 12.

though they formed their own ecclesiastical structures and continued throughout the nineteenth century to develop separately.

Even though many Mennonite Brethren families stayed in Khortitsa and Molochna, tensions between the communities seemed to have somewhat subsided by the 1870s. A number of factors contributed to this détente. A change in leadership at the district office in the Molochna settlement as a result of the landless crisis eased the civil reprisals levelled at the Brethren.[115] As well, a number of Mennonite Brethren families emigrated after the tsarist state revoked exemption from conscription for its minorities in 1874 and the Mennonites quickly had to negotiate alternative service for its young male population.

While relations improved, antagonism between the groups remained under the surface, in part due to an absence of an official resolution from St. Petersburg. The Russian government's recognition of the German Baptists as a tolerated confession in 1879 illustrates the lingering animosity between the Brethren and the wider Mennonite community. For administrative purposes, the government contacted local administrators to produce a census of Baptist believers in their areas. The Khortitsa district office reported Mennonite Brethren believers to be Baptists.[116] This act forced the Brethren to petition the state to recognize their status as Mennonites. The government demanded that the Brethren's confession of faith be presented in Russian and German. After submitting their confession of faith, along with an explanation of their relationship to the Baptists, the Brethren managed to receive confirmation of their confessional status as Mennonites from the government.

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[115] Urry, 203.
[116] Friesen, 479.

The disruption caused by the Mennonite schism raised important questions for Mennonites about the regulation of religious life and the intersection between civil and religious spheres in the colonies. In the case of the schism, the question of who had the authority to define Mennonite versus non-Mennonite practices was not entirely clear, as Mennonites lacked a hierarchical religious structure to arbitrate in these circumstances and both groups claimed Menno Simons' legacy as their rightful inheritance. Also, the dual meaning of "Mennonite" as an ethnic and a religious identity contributed to the intensity of the dispute, as the Brethren's split from the established churches jeopardized their civil and religious rights. At the heart of the schism was a debate over religious boundaries, fueled in part by broader economic and social currents, which encouraged the formation of relationships outside of the local setting. For example, the Brethren's fellowship with Baptists outside of Russia began through religious tracts received by Mennonite colonists. Also, Lutheran colonists from Alt and Neu-Danzig (in the province of Kherson) fostered a spiritual relationship with the Brethren by visiting Abram Unger's wagon factory in Einlage.[117] These relationships, along with the Brethren's re-definition of religious rituals to include a broader, more public role for the laity in worship challenged the traditions of the established churches. The refusal of the Mennonite leadership to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Brethren movement, along with the Brethren's defence of their right to form their own congregation, necessitated the involvement of the state. In an attempt to strengthen their position against the other, both solicited the support of the Russian authorities, with the established churches eliciting sympathy from regional governmental bodies and the Brethren concentrating their efforts at the national level. While Mennonites historically protected the autonomy of their

[117] Ibid., 327.

communities from outside forces, the disruption created by the schism in Mennonite daily life caused both groups to look outside internal channels of dispute resolution. Yet, instead of demonstrating the enlightenment of Russia's policy towards its minority groups, the Russian state's involvement in mediating this crisis revealed Russia's muddled approach at governing its borderlands.

Chapter Two: Assembling an Intervention

In 1860 the Guardian Committee became the first Russian governmental body involved in the Mennonite schism. For the next decade, local, regional, and national levels of government struggled to find a standard position on the schism. Each government agency interpreted the significance of the schism differently, leading to a haphazard approach to resolving tensions in the Mennonite community and to normalizing the Brethren's relationship to the state. The social stability of the Mennonite colonies and the surrounding villages topped the list of concerns about the schism for all the government agencies; however, views of what threatened the stability of the area differed. For the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) social stability was synonymous with political loyalty, whereas the Guardian Committee and the Governor-General of the region defined social stability as respecting local authorities and not engaging in unregulated, disruptive activities. The reaction of these bodies to the Brethren's activities illustrates these different definitions of social stability, which affected the interpretation of and implementation of religious policy in the empire. Although the Brethren were not exiled or forcibly relocated, their treatment differed depending on which governmental body they dealt with.

Mennonite historiography has approached the schism primary from a local perspective, focusing on the internal dynamics of Mennonite community politics. Most of the literature concerns itself with the question of causation, searching for explanations of why the Mennonite schism happened and how the Mennonite community reacted to this religious turmoil. Scholars have proposed social, economic, and spiritual factors as stimuli for the schism. Predominately, Mennonite scholars have tended to emphasize

spiritual factors as the most important cause.[118] According to this approach, scholars cite either the spiritual decay of the established churches or the spiritual arrogance of the Brethren as the key explanation. In recent years, Mennonite historiography has incorporated a more comprehensive understanding of Mennonite community life. Particularly the work of James Urry has argued that instead of being disconnected from broader social trends, Mennonite society was subject to the vicissitudes of social development in Russia. Urry presents the schism as a response to the transformation of Mennonite communities in Russia: traditional Mennonite notions of community strained under the rapid economic and social change they experienced.[119] The Brethren movement, like the landless movement, was a product of this transition period. Yet Urry's work, like the rest of Mennonite historiography, assigns the Russian government a minor role in this process.

As the schism had far-reaching consequences for the Mennonite community and its neighbours, it should not have been expected to go unnoticed by the Russian regional government. And it did not. An abundance of correspondence between different levels of the government debated the implication of the schism and the characteristics and beliefs of the sectarians. Although experienced with governing multireligious territories, the reaction of the Russian government illustrates its persistent struggle to form a cohesive approach to administering and supervising the minority religious groups living in its borderlands. Hindering the establishment of a standard policy was the "bewildering web of overlapping jurisdictions and parallel, unintegrated channels of authority" that was the

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[118] Peter J Klassen, "The Historiography of the Birth of the Mennonite Brethren Church: An Introduction" in *P.M Friesen & His History* (Winnipeg: The Christian Press, 1979),117.

[119] See James Urry, *None but Saints: Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hypersion Press Limited, 1989)

Russian bureaucracy.[120] Particularly in the nineteenth century, as Russia experienced economic and social changes which broke down boundaries between ethnic groups, the government's ad hoc religious policy began to create more problems than it solved.

In the case of the Mennonite schism, there seems to have been little evolution in the government's policies toward the Mennonite Brethren. Instead, positions taken from the beginning of the schism by local, regional and national governmental bodies remained consistent throughout the 1860s. The Guardian Committee and the Governor-General ascribed the sectarians a pernicious character and attempted to use their power to at least curb the growth of the sect, if not destroy the movement. In contrast, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of State Domains (MGI) in St. Petersburg took a pragmatic, tolerant approach. They collected information about the activities of the sectarians and judged the character of the secessionists based on the information gathered. They regarded the movement to be primarily religious in nature and the secessionists to be somewhat fanatical, but fundamentally innocuous.[121] Although concerned with certain activities of the Brethren, these national agencies were interested more in any indication of religious interaction between the Brethren and Orthodox believers than in becoming embroiled in an ostensibly internal Mennonite dispute.

The different interpretations of the nature of the schism and its impact on the region affected the approaches proposed by these agencies for dealing with this issue. The absence of a consensus on how to proceed produced ambiguity in Russia's religious policy. Since the substance of the policy depended on the level of the bureaucracy

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[120] John Staples, *Cross- Cultural Encounters on the Ukrainian Steppes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 22.
[121] John B.Toews,ed., *The Story of the Early Mennonite Brethren: Reflections of a Lutheran Churchman* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2002), 165.

involved, the Mennonites experienced contradictory directives to address their schism. These contradictory measures created more divisions for Mennonites, as each side managed to find a sympathetic ear in the bureaucracy.

First on the Scene: The Regional Authorities Slowly Respond

In the aftermath of the Mennonite schism, the Guardian Committee was the first government body to assess the situation. Created by Alexander I to supervise Russia's foreign settlements in Southern Russia, the Guardian Committee managed the colonists' social and economic development. Headquartered in Odessa, the Guardian Committee relied on inspectors to keep it informed about the settlements and to supervise the implementation of the Committee's directive to the colonies.[122] In early February, a Guardian Committee inspector spoke to local Mennonite officials about the schism. To gather more information about the break, he also approached the dissenting Brethren. During their conversation, the inspector convinced three of the main secessionists that the Russian government supported the free practice of religious beliefs and that he would help them receive official recognition if they agreed to abstain from any more disruptive behaviour. Three brethren, Abraham Cornelssen, Isaak Koop and Johann Claassen, signed a document agreeing to "not secede from the Mennonite Church, not perform any ecclesiastical ceremony… not take any religious action which is forbidden by [the] church elders – without first [having] received the express permission of the higher authorities."[123] The signatories quickly realized the folly of this action as the inspector did not lobby on their behalf for recognition. The Brethren continued to worship

[122] Staples, 22.
[123] Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, trans. J.B. Toews, A. Friesen et al. (Fresno, Calif., 1978), 236.

separately from the established churches, but the three signatories honoured part of their commitment and did not take on leadership roles in the movement.

After the Committee's first attempt to stop the movement failed, it decided to gather more information on the activities of the secessionists. Later in the same year, the Guardian Committee wrote to the Molochna district office to have the colony's elders answer three questions:

(1) Who are the main leaders of the group?
(2) What types of reprimands have been attempted by the local authorities to suppress the new sect?
(3) What means should be used to suppress and totally extinguish the spread of the sect? [124]

The tone of these questions revealed the Guardian Committee's desire to stop, as opposed to understand, the movement. Instead of asking about the validity of the secessionists' complaints, the Guardian Committee only wanted to know what had been done in the past and what should be done in the future to arrest the Brethren's spread.

Unsolicited for their side of the story, the Brethren still wrote to the Guardian Committee to refute the established churches' characterization of their group. As relations between the established churches and the Brethren continued to deteriorate, the Brethren feared that the government would judge their movement based on gossip and slander instead of impartial information. Signed by five members of the Brethren, the letter challenged the Guardian Committee's characterization of the group as a "newly arisen sect" by claiming lineage with Menno Simons.[125] It also took umbrage with the Committee's third question, arguing that they should not be subjected to persecution for their beliefs. In their letter, the Brethren deftly dealt with the Russian officials. Presenting

[124] Franz Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* (Halbstadt: H.J Braun, 1908), 185.
[125] Friesen, 245.

their disagreement with their fellow Mennonite colonists as spiritual in nature, they emphasized their political and social reliability, and their desire to remain loyal colonists in the future:

> and we do not believe that the illustrious committee will condemn those to punishment or even consent to having their names removed from the list of colonists who believe and love according to the Scripture, who cannot be accused of any political offence, and who, in contrast, live quiet lives; rather we believe, that as much as lies in its power, it will take us under its protection…[126]

They understood that the Guardian Committee could protect them from local retribution for their beliefs, but could also condemn them to hardships if it revoked their Mennonite colonist status.

The Mennonite Brethren initially had little to fear since the Guardian Committee chose not to act on the information it collected. Yet, as the movement spread to other regions in New Russia, the apathy of the Committee ceased. Directions sent from the Guardian Committee in late February 1862 to the Khortitsa district office supported the measures proposed by the district office to stop the spread of the sect.[127] The Committee declared the teaching of groups such as the Friends of Jerusalem[128] and the Huepfer[129] to be contrary to the beliefs of the government. Through their disrespectful attitude towards the established Mennonite churches, the teaching of the secessionists opposed the

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[126] Ibid., 246.

[127] Aleksii (Dorodnitsyn) *Materialy dlia istorii religiozno-ratsionalisticheskogo dvizheniia na iuge Rossii vo vtoroi polovine 19-go st.* (Kazan': Tsentral'naia tipografiia, 1908), 1.

[128] The Friends of Jerusalem was a religious movement originating from Prussia out of the Pietest movement. Christoph Hoffmann, the leader of the Friends of Jerusalem or Templer movement, aspired to form a community of like-minded believers in the Christian holy land of Jerusalem. A small group of Mennonites, including Johannes Lange, formed relationships with Templers in Prussia and brought the movement to Russian Mennonite colonies in the 1860s. The movement appeared at the same time as the Mennonite Brethren, but the movements were separate, although little research has been done on cooperation between the groups. For more information see Heinrich Sawatzky, *Templer Mennonitischer Herkunft* (Winnipeg, 1955).

[129] The document does not use the term Huepfer, but it does list the main leaders of the Huepfer movement as the fanatics who threaten the established order.

traditions of the colonies and therefore was dangerous.[130] The Brethren's use of the term "brothel" (*publichnii dom*) to describe the church and their claim of being "born again" (*rodilis' vnov*) challenged the church leadership. According to the Committee, police intervention should be used to keep these "dangerous people" (*opasnye liudi*) in check.[131]

Unregulated religious activities and the influence of foreign religious figures, according to the Committee, represented the two main causes of sectarianism in Mennonite villages.[132] The Guardian Committee supported the district office's request that village mayors tighten control over meetings held at private residences by sectarians, contending that the sectarians used these opportunities to make converts. The measures to control movement in the villages included imposing a ten o'clock curfew in Khortitsa and Einlage, and establishing a night watch to ensure the curfew was respected.[133] Preaching by foreigners was to be banned, and this ban should be enforced by the police.[134]

The Guardian Committee's conflation of foreign itinerant preachers with sectarianism highlights the government's concern over the influence of foreigners on religious life in the region. Throughout the 1860s, government communiqués revealed a deep fear of foreign religious figures travelling through the western borderland. As we have seen, in 1869, Baptist leader Johann Oncken journeyed from Hamburg into Russia, where he visited Mennonite and Baptist communities. The extensive government correspondence over this visit exemplifies this fear. A letter from the Governor-General of New Russia, Pavel Kotsebu, to the Kherson provincial authorities warned the local

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[130] Aleksii, 2.
[131] Ibid., 2.
[132] "Eine Sekte" *Odessaer Zeitung*, March 18, 1864, 254-5
[133] Aleksii, 2.
[134] Ibid., 1.

officials about Oncken's visit and emphasized the appearance of an Anabaptist sect supported by foreign emissaries in the village of Alt-Danzig.[135] Kotsebu suggested to the Guardian Committee that the police follow Oncken and his entourage and use the full power of the law if the emissaries tried to proselytize among the population.[136] Around the same time, the Khortitsa district office received a similar warning about foreign preachers in the region. The Guardian Committee asked the district office to watch closely the Mennonite village of Einlage, a hotbed of sectarian activity, and check that foreigners were only in the village for valid reasons, such as work.[137]

In addition to its anxiety over foreign influences, the regional government also feared the propagation of sectarian teaching between communities in Russia. The Guardian Committee probed into the Huepfer movement's diffusion into German, Swedish and Jewish colonies in Kherson province. According to the district offices of the Swedish and Neu-Danzig colonies, the Huepfer movement posed a danger to society– specifically to the family unit. Unless the dissenters rejoined the Evangelical Lutheran or Catholic churches, the district office wished to have permission to expel them from the communities.[138] In an attempt to contain the movement, the Guardian Committee requested that Kotsebu appoint an investigator to watch the sectarians, and prevent them from disrupting the social order. The document cited the excessively antagonistic attitude of the sectarians towards the established order as justification for this request. The Committee also directed the district offices and colony supervisors to make sure that the

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[135] Ibid., 72.
[136] Amusingly, Oncken mentions the circular sent by the Governor-General to government officials: "Hitherto the Lord has helped me marvelously, for although Kotzebue, the Governor-General, sent an order to all the colonies to keep a sharp watch on the movements of the "Baptist emissaries," I have nevertheless passed unharmed through the enemy's lines." "Letters from Mr. Oncken in Russia" *Quarterly Reporter* no. 48, January 1870, 802.
[137] Aleksii, 73.
[138] Toews, 48.

movement leaders did not travel until the government determined the status of the group.[139]

In mid-June 1864, the Guardian Committee dispatched a supervisor to the Khortitsa settlement to gather information from the local authorities about the spread of the Huepfer religious sect to Kherson province.[140] The supervisor located the origin of the sectarian movement and the cause of its proliferation squarely in the Mennonite colonies of Khortitsa and Molochna, naming the leaders of the movement from both colonies. He communicated the Guardian Committee's concern that through their actions the sectarians were disrupting public order and decency. Most disconcerting, according to the supervisor, was the suspicion that the sectarians were corrupting local Orthodox believers. He indicated that the Ministry of State Domains and the Governor-General of New Russia would be informed. To prevent the further growth of the sect, the supervisor reiterated the Guardian Committee's instructions for the district officials to monitor the sectarian leaders.

The Guardian Committee received much of its information about the sect from distraught local civil and religious officials who resented the disruption of the normal state of affairs in their communities. For instance, the Guardian Committee, the Khortitsa district office, and the religious leaders of the colony corresponded extensively over the emergence of the Brethren. A report sent to the Guardian Committee in June 1862 from both these groups reiterated that the sectarians had rejected the established Mennonite church by refusing to follow its rituals and by acting disrespectfully towards its elders.[141] Instead, the sectarians performed their own perverse rituals such as immersion baptism,

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[139] The leaders of the movement in Neu-Danzig were exiled from the colony. See Toews, 134.
[140] Aleksii, 44.
[141] Ibid., 3-4.

which posed a danger to the health of religious communities in the region. The sectarians believed, according to the report, that they were following the Word of God by converting individuals from different religious denominations to their sect. The report further contended that since the sectarians no longer belonged to the Mennonite religious community (tserkovnoe obshchestvo), they should not be entitled to Mennonite civil rights (grazhdanskie prava).[142] Local officials strongly suggested that to limit the proliferation of the group, the leaders of the movement be removed from the colony. In response to their concerns, the Ekaterinoslav uezd police arrested three leaders of the Brethren for their false doctrine (lzheuchenie).[143] As direct participants in the conflict, local civil and religious officials were a biased source to provide information about the Brethren movement to the Russian authorities. Although the Guardian Committee dispatched its own representative to the colonies to gather evidence, one could postulate that the pre-existing relationship between the Guardian Committee supervisors and local leaders (as representative of the state) made the supervisors sympathetic to the local leaders' opinions.

Also sympathetic to the local leaders' negative presentation of the Huepfer was the Governor-General of New Russia, Pavel Kotsebu.[144] Throughout the 1860s, Kotsebu worked to rid the province of the pernicious presence of sectarians. In Kherson province, he requested permission from the MGI to exile those former Lutherans and Catholics who had joined the Huepfer movement, citing the immoral and harmful nature of the sect's teaching.[145] According to Kotsebu, the teachings instilled "spiritual resistance to

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[142] Ibid., 5.
[143] Ibid., 6.
[144] Pavel Kotsebu was the Governor- General of New Russia from 1862 to 1874.
[145] Toews, 134.

authorities and damaged the local economy."[146] Moreover, the Huepfer violated the moral order through their unconventional spiritual practices. The Governor-General agreed with the Guardian Committee that the Huepfers' presence posed more than a religious nuisance in the region. Their portrayal of the movement as disruptive to the social stability of New Russia shows the importance placed by both agencies on the impact of religious values on the functioning of community life and the preference of regional officials for stable religious identities.

Widening the Investigation: National Ministries Enter the Debate

As the central administrative body responsible for the welfare of the state peasantry and colonization of state land, the Ministry of State Domains had broader interests and concerns than the Guardian Committee and the Governor-General of New Russia. Created in 1837 to improve the living standards of the state peasantry through the reform of Russia's rural economy, the MGI inherited not only responsibility over ethnic Russian state peasants, but also over "the south's bewildering array of foreign colonists."[147] Although the MGI's mandate prioritized economic concerns, such as land distribution, resettlement, and providing materials and instructional aid to state peasants,[148] due to its position as the Guardian Committee's superior, social and religious issues within state peasant communities also came to its attention – particularly when relocation or exile was proposed.[149]For example, on 20 June 1862, the Guardian

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[146] Toews, 153.
[147] Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 143.
[148] Ibid., 138.
[149] The Russian government commonly used exile as a way to manage its population. For example, Nicholas I tried to keep Orthodox peasants away from Russian sectarian groups such as the Dukhobors and

Committee apprised the MGI of the appearance of a religious sectarian group in the Khortitsa colony. The Guardian Committee once again expressed concern about the harm this group could cause to the social stability of the colony. As a corrective measure to reestablish social order and to prevent the further spread of the sect, the Committee suggested that the leaders of the group be removed not only from the colony, but also from the empire. As for the movement's followers, the Committee recommended that they be relocated to a remote region in the empire, like the Amur or the Caucasus.[150]

The ministry responded to the Guardian Committee eight days later by questioning it about a note submitted to the Russian government by Gerhard Wieler regarding religious persecution in the Khortitsa colony. [151] The ministry summarized Wieler's claims that the local district authorities deprived the Brethren of their religious and civil rights. The Guardian Committee responded to the inquiry by passing on the MGI's request for information about Wieler's complaints to its supervisor of the colony.[152] The document repeated much of the same information found in the MGI's report. It reiterated Wieler's accusation that local officials persecuted the Brethren and denied them their civil liberties, which compromised their economic livelihood. The Guardian Committee requested that the Khortitsa district office be asked to provide information about the relationship between Mennonites and the newly formed sect and the validity of Wieler's complaints. The supervisor complied by issuing an order to the Khortitsa district office to provide the Guardian Committee immediately with an account

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the Molokans by exiling the latter groups to the periphery of the empire. See Nicholas Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[150] Toews, 46.

[151] Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Odesskoi Oblasti f.6, op.5, d.278, l. 105

[152] Aleskii, 35-36.

of the complaint and an explanation from the religious elders about the relationship between the new sect and Mennonite beliefs.[153]

In September of the same year, the Khortitsa district office and elders responded to Wieler's accusations. Predictably, they rejected Wieler's portrayal of their actions towards the Brethren and they refuted Wieler's claim that he was entitled to form a separate congregation. To allow this formation, argued the Khortitsa colony leadership, would breed division in the church and result in the destruction of Mennonite society.[154] Notably, the Khortitsa authorities also denied deepening the rift by initiating the arrests of the Brethren. [155] Instead, the Khortitsa office blamed the legal actions taken against the Brethren on the officials from the Ekaterinoslav uezd and the proselytizing activities of the Brethren. This exchange of information, beginning with Wieler's complaint to the central government in St. Petersburg, attests to the problems of appealing to a higher authority in a centralized bureaucratic system. The Brethren were able to inform the central authorities located in St. Petersburg about their situation; however, to substantiate their complaint, the ministries relied on information from regional and local government authorities.

The MVD entered last into the fray over the Mennonite schism, but, as one of the most powerful governmental bodies in the empire, it took a leading role in determining the treatment of the Brethren. Responsible for a myriad of tasks from press censorship, policing the state, ensuring social stability and providing postal and telegraph service, the

[153] Ibid., 37.
[154] Aleskii, 16.
[155] Ibid., 14-15.

MVD was a mammoth bureaucratic machine.[156] On the heels of the Polish uprising of 1863-64 in the western borderlands, the MVD faced a much smaller, though nonetheless disconcerting disturbance in the empire's south-western borderland. Reluctant to risk breeding fanaticism of a non-political movement through repressive measures, the MVD proposed toleration and gentle guidance as the solution to the Mennonite schism.

Information about the schism arrived at the MVD from numerous sources. At the end of February 1864, the Ministry of Justice informed the MVD that Alexander Brune would be travelling to Southern Russia to engage in a number of activities, including the investigation of a "mystical sect" (*misticheskaia sekta*) in the Mennonite colonies in Ekaterinoslav province.[157] Information also arrived from the Mennonite colony itself. In early March 1864, the Minister of the MVD, Peter Valuev, wrote to the Procurator of the Evangelical Lutheran General Consistory about the Mennonite schism.[158] He communicated the concerns expressed to the MVD by Heinrich Hesse from the Mennonite village of Einlage. Hesse informed the MVD that a sect had emerged in the Khortitsa colony. This sect scolded the other colonists who refused to follow its "deranged" teachings, claiming that they had not received salvation. According to Hesse, the leaders of this group also had Russian and German converts. In response to Hesse's letter, the MVD requested that Alexander Brune report to the Ministry on the characteristics of this sect, in addition to his other duties of gathering information about the Lutheran colonies in Southern Russia.

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[156] Daniel T. Orlovsky, *The Limits of Reform: The Ministry of Internal Affairs in Imperial Russia, 1802-1881*(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 39.
[157] Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (RGIA) f. 821, op.5, d. 976, l.1.
[158] RGIA f.821, op.5, d. 976, l.4.

The negative characterization of the Brethren movement by the MVD's initial sources did not entice the ministry to propose a rash, reactive policy. For the MVD, the label of schismatic did not automatically lead to the condemnation of a group. The initial tolerant attitude of the MVD towards the schism shows that the separation of foreign believers from their confession was not necessarily viewed as an act of sedition. Instead, the MVD waited until it received reliable information about the group's activities before deciding what its response should be to the dissenting Mennonites.

Notably, the MVD chose an individual outside the Mennonite community to be its source of information. The reliance on a Lutheran minister as a liaison between the Ministry and the Brethren raises a number of intriguing points about the relationship between the Russian government and foreign confessions, and the role of foreign religious institutions and authorities in policing the empire. The issue of language made the use of a German-speaking Lutheran representative an ideal and necessary choice for investigating the Mennonite schism. To delve into village life and interact directly with the sectarians required knowledge of the German language, as few Mennonites could adequately express themselves in Russian. Nonetheless, the MVD could have tapped civil as opposed to religious authorities in the region to gather information. The use of the Lutheran Consistory reveals the importance attributed by the MVD to the religious implications and characteristics of the schism and potential repercussion of the schism for the surrounding Lutheran community.

Alexander Brune submitted multiple reports to the MVD over the period of about a year, beginning in 1864.[159] Brune's reports detailed his interaction with the Huepfer and his thoughts on religious life in the movement and the general religious health of the

[159] Toews, 18.

Mennonite colonies. He raised a number of important issues about the characteristics of the Huepfer movement and the best approach to re-establishing Mennonite order.

The impact of the Brethren's religious ceremonies on the social order of the colony emerged as one of the major themes of Brune's inquiry. According to Brune, the impropriety of the Brethren's approach to religious rituals included "noisy gaiety, singing hymns to the tune of contemporary secular melodies to the accompaniment of violins, accordions and wild dancing."[160] Brune also described activities by the Brethren such as public baptisms, private communion and frenetically joyous religious gatherings, as "an obvious violation of the existing order."[161] Even though the sectarians' actions concerned Brune, he did not suggest punitive measures as a method for curbing their activities.

According to Brune, attempts by Mennonite religious elders to stop the growth of the sectarian movement through excommunication failed, and inflamed the movement towards fanaticism.[162] As the sectarians believed that only through suffering could they be purified, they reacted with pious disdain towards the admonitions of the established church.[163] Brune critically wrote of the sectarians that: "They view all church action and offices as depraved. As a result of this exalted view of themselves, they have fallen into a religious delirium, fanaticism and division, and the sinful, evil errors often connected with this mindset."[164] Instead of inspiring reform in the church, the approach of the sectarians only created more animosity and led to a deeper division between the groups.

The MVD followed reasoning similar to Brune's when forming its policy for the region. Overall, the Ministry of Internal Affairs expressed the need for tolerance towards

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[160] Ibid., 20.
[161] Ibid., 22.
[162] Ibid., 20.
[163] Ibid., 21.
[164] Ibid.,106.

the Brethren. Fearful of fanaticism, the MVD argued that strict measures or persecution would only increase the steadfastness of the Brethren in their beliefs. The Ministry of State Domains agreed with that assessment.[165] The MVD suggested that the same procedure be followed as in the 1843 imperial ruling on a schism in the Lutheran community:

> If the sectarians carry out all of their civil duties, leave them without any persecution. The Lutheran clergy should hold onto their congregation in love and devotion to their teachings not through civil measures, but by moral influence. [166]

The MVD's prioritizing of loyalty to the state over fidelity to recognized religious confessions demonstrated the significance attached to political loyalty of foreign communities. For the MVD, membership in a religious sect did not automatically imply political dissidence. The ministry's suggestion also confirmed its principle that the persecution of religious sectarians for their beliefs would not lead to reconciliation. Only through patient care by religious leaders would these sectarians be convinced of their folly. In the short term, the MVD supported toleration of schisms as long as sectarians fulfilled their civil duties; in the long term, the MVD looked to local religious leaders to reunify their flock. The MVD envisioned for itself a minimal role in regulating internal conflicts of foreign faiths.

A report by Peter Valuev, the Minister of the MVD, in 1867 to the MGI elucidated the MVD's method of maintaining stability in Russia's foreign colonies. Valuev once again stated the ministry's position that the Huepfer should be tolerated and not subjected to persecution for their religious beliefs, as persecution only breeds

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[165] S.D Bondar, *Sekta mennonitov v' rossii; v' sviazi s' istorii niemetskoi kolonizatzii na iuge rossii: ocherk'*. (Petrograd Tipografiia V.D Smirnova, 1916), 132.
[166] Ibid.

fanaticism, unless of course, the sectarians proselytized in Orthodox communities. Valuev readily supported civil officials persecuting those who converted Orthodox believers. While he agreed with Brune that the movement had already begun to be weakened by internal struggles, Valuev also expressed a concern over the treatment of sectarians by local officials, particularly in the Kherson province. Criticizing the use of punitive measures against the sectarians by the Governor-General of New Russia, Valuev argued that the activities of the sectarians should not be labelled as destabilizing to the public order. [167]

The MVD did not entirely disagree with the position of the Guardian Committee and the Governor-General. It too feared the religious influence from sources outside of Russia in the colonies. To combat this influence, the MVD suggested that only government-approved foreign preachers be allowed to travel in Russia and that efforts be made to train religious teachers inside the empire, instead of bringing foreign-trained pastors into minority communities. Concern that dangerous political ideas disguised as religious rhetoric might be flowing into Russia, the MVD tried to limit the contact between Russian minority groups and their ethnic counterparts in Western Europe. [168] Therefore, for the MVD sectarians were not necessarily a problem; unless, of course, they originated from a source outside of the Russian empire.

The Social Significance of Spreading Salvation: The Brethren Proselytize

While government agencies debated what should be done about the Mennonite schism, the Brethren busied themselves with spreading salvation both inside and outside

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[167] Toews, 173.
[168] Ibid., 167.

Mennonite confessional boundaries. The early Brethren's commitment to proselytizing and conducting outdoor ceremonies transgressed spatial, ethnic and gender boundaries. Particularly, the Brethren's active effort to enlighten Orthodox believers challenged the state's religious policy prohibiting this type of activity. The reaction of the government to these transgressions raises notable questions about Russia's approach to managing its religiously diverse empire. The underlying assumption of the government's religious policy– that religious identities were immutable– created problems as interethnic boundaries in other spheres were crossed. For example, the movement of Ukrainian workers into Mennonite villages initially as farmer labourers and later as workers in factories caused new forms of interrelations outside the economic sphere. The inability of the Russian government to address these changes in a constructive way reveals how unprepared the government was for the consequences of interethnic conversations.

Throughout the nineteenth century, but particularly in the post-emancipation era, an atmosphere of religious exploration and experimentation permeated throughout the Southern Russian region, creating an eclectic sea of sectarian communities. In addition to movements originating out of German-speaking communities, a number of indigenous Ukrainian sectarian groups appeared during this period. The openness of these movements to public spiritual exchanges contributed to cross-fertilization between members of the same and different ethnicities.[169] The event that officially started the Shtundist movement in Southern Russian displayed this element of collective euphoria and the contagiousness of such public displays of spiritually. It also shows the

[169] For more on the vibrancy of sectarian movements in Southern Russia, see Sergei Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation: Peasants, Millennialism, and Radical Sects in Southern Russia and Ukraine, 1830-1917.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); John Staples, *Cross- Cultural Encounters on the Ukrainian Steppes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), Heather Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

significances of public spaces to the Brethren's transgression of ethnic boundaries. On 11 June 1869, Baptists and Mennonite Brethren religious leaders gathered with a large group of worshippers from both German and Ukrainian backgrounds along the Sugakle River close to the colony of Alt-Danzig.[170] According to the recollections of Rev. Johann Pritzkau, the palpable excitement of the event inspired Brother E. [Efim Tsymbal] to be baptized; however, the religious leaders present could not decide if they should baptize an ethnic Russian (Nationalrusse).[171] They decided against this course of action, but Tsymbal wanted to be baptized and mixed himself with the other baptismal candidates and, without their knowledge, was baptized.[172] Local leaders from Alt-Danzig contradicted Pritzkau's recollection of the manner in which Tsymbal's baptism took place, but they reinforced the notion of baptism as a spectacle, which would draw onlookers. According to leaders of the Alt-Danzig colony, Abram Unger, a leader of the Brethren, gathered along the riverbank all those who wished to accept rebaptism. He began the proceedings by reading from the Gospel in German, followed by the singing of German hymns. Thirty baptismal candidates entered the water individually, where Unger prayed and then baptized each by immersion.[173]

Through their ceremonies the Brethren not only challenged ethnic boundaries, they also, according to the Russian government, transgressed gender boundaries. Brune commented on gender indiscretions at the Brethren's worship services where all

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[170] A. Rozhdestvenskii. Iuzhno-russkii shtundizm (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Departamenta Udielov, 1889), 101. Rozhdestvenskii reported that forty-seven people from Tsymbal's village also witnessed the event.
[171] Pritzkau, 28. [Efim Tsymbal was in fact an ethnic Ukrainian, but at this point foreign colonists and the Russian government did not differentiate between the two groups.]
[172] Pritzkau, 28.
[173] Aleksii, 72.

participants, regardless of gender, "sing, jump, rejoice, dance and kiss everyone."[174] According to another report submitted to the Russian government, young women especially were at risk of being seduced by the debauchery of the Brethren's rituals:

> They [the local authorities] have complained bitterly about the scandal and the disorder brought into families, in which the women, especially the young ones, allow themselves to be enticed by the attraction of obscene rites and dissolute preaching, leaving their husbands and children and abandoning all restraint and duties of their sex.[175]

Although these reports reflected a discomfort at witnessing women participating as equals in unconventional religious worship, they also confirmed the presence of women at these events. A report to the MVD from the Governor-General of New Russia verified the gender parity of the Brethren, with 106 males and 102 females in the Ekaterinoslav province and 171 males and 167 females in the Taurida province belonging to the movement.[176] The involvement of women in religious ceremonies and the negative reaction to their involvement evoked questions about the government's fear of schismatic religious movements in redefining gender roles in their communities and women's participation as a sign of social disorder. [177]

The employment of Ukrainian peasants in Mennonite households and the economic dealings between ethnic groups allowed for spatial distance between these groups to be bridged. As David Rempel's memoirs of the late- nineteenth and early-twentieth century indicate, Mennonites frequently interacted and built relationships (economic, religious and social) with their non-Mennonite neighbours. For instance, as

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[174] Toews, 22.
[175] Ibid., 143.
[176] RGIA, f.821, op.5, d.975, l. 84ob.
[177] See Sergei Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation: Peasants, Millennialism, and Radical Sects in Southern Russia and Ukraine, 1830-1917*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

the owner of a general store, Rempel's father spoke fluent Russian, Ukrainian and Yiddish, in addition to Low German for dealing with his customers.[178] Similarly Gerhard Wieler used his linguistic skills and the opportunities created by closer economic relations between Slavs and Mennonites to build relationship outside of his ethno-confession. According to a communication sent to the Khortitsa district office by the Ekaterinslav uezd police, Wieler attempted to convert thirteen Russian workers from Unger's factory.[179] He also tried to convert a girl who worked for his mother. Orders send to the Khortitsa district office in May 1862 instructed the local government to keep Russian Orthodox workers away from sectarians and to ensure that they only worked for trustworthy Mennonites.[180]

The Mennonite Brethren also travelled outside their communities to propagate their beliefs to Ukrainian peasants from neighbouring villages.[181] Itinerant Mennonite preachers played a major role in developing spiritual ties between communities. A Baptist missionary journal reported to its readers that a schoolteacher (most likely Gerhard Wieler) fluent in the Russian language from the Mennonite village of L. preached the Gospel to Ukrainians and Germans in the area.[182] Gifted with words, this schoolteacher ministered to the Ukrainians in the village of T. and convinced them that they would not find salvation in the Orthodox Church. In addition to renouncing "image worship", they now spent their evenings engaged in reading the New Testament, instead of "drinking in

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[178] David Rempel with Cornelia Rempel Carlson. *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, 1789-1923*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 36.
[179] Aleksii, 21.
[180] Ibid.
[181] The author describes the villagers as Russians, although they most likely were Ukrainians. Also L. probably stands for the village of Libenau and T. for the village of Tokmak.
[182] "Fresh Intelligence from the South" *Quarterly Reporter* No. 17 April 1862, 27.

the public-houses."[183] Implying that immoral living included not only visits to the tavern, but also to the local Orthodox Church, the Brethren acknowledged only their own path to salvation and they sought to impart this knowledge to all who would listen.

Abram Unger also wrote to the same journal about his journey to the Lutheran village of Alt-Danzig.[184] He expressed joy in finding twenty-five converted Russian male and female believers in the nearby village of Kalocoka. According to Unger, the truth was revealed to these Russians through their study of the New Testament, after which they realized "the idolatry of the Greek church and have left it."[185] Instead of attending Orthodox church, the Russians worshipped God separately in private homes, where they "pray and sing Russian hymns..."[186] These Russians also shared fellowship with converted Germans in Alt-Danzig. During Unger's visit, their Russian brethren twice traveled to Alt-Danzig for services and he described their fellowship together: "It was touching to behold how they wept, while we were partaking of the Lord's Supper, and most earnestly they entreated us to send them a brother, who would further instruct them in the divine truth, baptize them and administer the Lord's Supper to them also."[187] Through the travels of Abram Unger and others to Lutheran and Slavic communities in Southern Russia, the Brethren transgressed spatial boundaries and developed social and religious identities outside of their respective communities.

As the Brethren joyously spread the gospel indiscriminately, Russian officials struggled to decide how to react to these violations of Russian religious policy. Soon after the Huepfer's appearance in the Khortitsa colony, the local Russian law enforcement

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[183] Ibid., 27.
[184] Abram, Unger, *Quarterly Reporter*, April 1869, 359.
[185] Ibid., 359.
[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid.

agencies weighed into the debate. By the summer of 1862, Ekaterinolav uezd officials started investigating the movement. In the village of Neu-Khortitsa, newly converted Johann Toews and Peter Nickel were under investigation as suspected followers of a sect.[188] At the beginning of June 1862, a supervisor for the MGI ordered the Khortitsa district office to continue its supervision of Toews and Nickel.[189] Around this same time, secessionists from other villages in the Khortitsa colony had similar experiences with the provincial judicial system. In June 1862, Russian officials arrested Abram Unger, Heinrich Neufeld, Peter Berg and Gerhard Wieler on charges of founding a new sect and of converting Orthodox believers.[190] The authorities brought the group before the Ekaterinoslav uezd court.

The Russian authorities interrogated each accused about the activities and beliefs of the group. The example of Gerhard Wieler's interrogation reveals the priority of the Russian authorities. The questions sought to establish the background of the accused and to compare the beliefs and rituals of the new group with the established Mennonite community. Yet, out of fifteen questions asked of Wieler, only one addressed the relationship between the sectarians and the Orthodox believers, inquiring if any Russian Orthodox believers had been seduced from their Orthodox faith.[191] The Russian officials focused the rest of their questions on establishing the relationship of the sect to the Mennonite confession. Questions about church rites, the Brethren's relationship with the established clergy and how the beliefs of the sectarians compared with the recognized

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[188] GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l. 108.
The documents refer to Toews and Nickel as belonging to a sect called Christ's followers (*Uchenikov Christa, Christi Jungen*). They belonged to the Mennonite Brethren movement as confirmed by baptism records (see J.B Toews pg 33) and Friesen 321.
[189] GAOO f.6, op.5,d. 278, l. 102.
[190] Aleksii, 24.
[191] GAOO f. 6,op.5,d 278, l.479

Mennonite confession elicited one of the first articulations by the Brethren of their beliefs. Also interviewed were Abram Unger and Peter Berg. In their testimonies, each denied that they had converted any Russians from Orthodoxy and that they had started a new sect.[192] For example, Unger claimed that the Brethren had not transgressed any laws through their behaviour and that all their religious activities reflected Mennonite customs.[193] Unger also disputed the claim that the Brethren intended to be a disruptive, corruptive force in Mennonite village life. They strove, according to Unger, to be obedient to the state. Instead of being the perpetrators, the Brethren were victims of arbitrary actions by the authorities.

Court documents indicated that to keep the defendants from continuing to suffer the horrors of prison, two Russians –a retired Second Lieutenant, Mikhail Torgat'ev, and a scribe, Kirill Egorov – offered to act as guarantors for them if they could be released on bail. The court agreed.[194] These Russians claimed to be well acquainted with the arrested Mennonites and could attest to their previously good behaviour.[195] As for the charges, the court decided that there was not enough evidence to convict the arrested Mennonites on the charge of seducing people from Orthodoxy. On the charge of founding a new sect, the court recognized that the accused had not forced their beliefs on others and that the Brethren claimed to be the true followers of the Mennonite faith.[196] The court decided to release the defendants, but stated that they should be closely watched to ensure that they did not spread their religious beliefs, as a ruling over whether their religious practices and beliefs remained faithful to Mennonite doctrine had not been established and would be

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[192] Aleksii, 19.
[193] Ibid., 20.
[194] Ibid., 38.
[195] Ibid., 38.
[196] Ibid., 38.

investigated further by the Guardian Committee.[197] Abram Unger, a defendant in the case, described the undramatic nature of the proceedings against them: "Following much discussion, they were at a loss to know what to do with us and finally decided to release us on bail."[198]

Excerpts from the diary of one of the defendants, Abram Unger, provide details not contained in official government documents about the experience of the defendants and of their activities within the Russian judicial system. After adamantly denying any proselytizing activities in their testimonies to the Russian government, Abram Unger wrote, "On the trip to this place we had the privilege of proclaiming the gospel and had been quite happy."[199] Unger also wrote about their encounter in prison with a member of the Russian Molokan sect, to whom they lent a Russian copy of the New Testament.[200] In the prison, "Br. Wieler had some sharp debates with well-educated unbelieving scoffers."[201] While none of these events constituted converting anyone from the Orthodox faith, they still fall into a grey area of religious interaction, which challenged the Russian government's preference for maintaining stable religious identities.

After their release, many of the Mennonite Brethren leaders, such as Gerhard Wieler and Peter Berg, remained recalcitrant towards the Russian government's policy on proselytizing. In 1864, the police once again investigated allegations that the Huepfer sect had spread to Orthodox communities. The police alleged that Wieler had converted two Ukrainian Orthodox believers – the peasant Matvei Serbulenko, whom he re-baptized

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[197] Ibid., 39.
[198] Friesen, 323.
[199] Ibid., 322.
[200] Ibid., 324.
[201] While the summary does not indicate in which language this debate took place in, one can infer from Gerhard Wieler's strong command of the Russian language that it took place in Russian.

into the Mennonite Brethren community, and Andrei Pedasenko, a member of the lower urban class (*meshchanin*).[202] The subsequent proceedings revealed a change in the attitude toward the Brethren by judicial officials. Having established that the movement did not constitute a new sect, the Aleksandrov police only arrested the Brethren on the charge of corrupting Russian Orthodox believers.[203] After investigating the incident, the local police found that another man, Conrad Weiss, was responsible for Pedasenko's conversion.[204] They placed Pedasenko in prison for his apostasy. In 1865, the Russian authorities locked Berg in prison for baptizing two Russian youths. Imprisonment did not dampen Berg's evangelical spirit and, according to Unger, Berg spent his time in prison ministering to a spiritually lost government official: "the Lord has made his stay in prison a blessing," he wrote, "to one of the secret ambassadors of the Emperor, who was imprisoned for a breach of law. He was truly converted... and wishes when he is set free to be baptized."[205] The Brethren's belief that only "a true baptism" conferred salvation on the soul motivated them to encourage all converted believers, regardless of ethnicity, to confirm their spiritual rebirth and their salvation through the ceremony of baptism.

Local officials readily arrested the Mennonite Brethren for alleged conversion and proselytizing offences, but rarely achieved a legal conviction against them. For example, in the case of Heinrich Huebert, the Russian authorities arrested him in 1865 for baptizing a Russian girl, Priska Morosova, who worked as a servant in his household.[206] The alleged incident had taken place three years earlier, after the girl left the Huebert household to work for another Mennonite family. According to a petition sent by Huebert

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[202] Bondar, 147.
[203] Aleksii, 40- 41.
[204] Toews, 51.
[205] Abram Unger, "Russia" *Quarterly Reporter* no.29, April 1865, 101.
[206] GAOO f. 6,op.5,d. 278,l. 506.

to Privy Councillor Baron von Brune, which protested his innocence of the charges, while working in their household, Priska learned enough German to be able to understand the Bible. [207] On her own initiative, after attending numerous Bible studies with the Brethren, Priska decided to be baptized, "in accordance with the [Mennonite Brethren] confession of faith."[208] In 1865 the Russian authorities heard about the event and sent Huebert to prison, where he remained for several months. At the hearing, Huebert told the court that he had been present, but had not baptized the girl. Upon further questioning, Huebert refused to identify the person who had performed the baptism; however, during the proceedings Abraham Dueck admitted that he had performed the ceremony.[209] As the girl had returned to the Orthodox Church, the court acquitted the men. The case of Huebert illustrates the difficulties associated with defining and prosecuting proselytizing and conversion. Huebert denied any unlawful activity, as he only allowed the Russian girl to participate in their Bible study and did not perform the baptism. Huebert's story raises the question about whether proselytizing involved only performing the act of baptism or included participation in fellowship by individuals from foreign confessions with members of the Orthodox Church. The tendency by the Russian government to forgive the transgression as long as the apostate returned to the Orthodox faith indicated that for government the priority was reintegration of the apostate rather than punitive measures against proselytizers.

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[207] Toews, 157.
[208] Ibid., 158.
[209] Jacob Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest, 1979), 173.

Government Bodies Collide: Conflict in the Interpretation of Rituals

From the beginning of the movement, the local and regional authorities expressed concern over the location of the Brethren's religious ceremonies. In the absence of available church buildings as meeting places for worship with fellow believers, combined with the movement's exploration of non-traditional sacred spaces (such as the outdoors), the Brethren cultivated their fellowship in a mixture of private and public spaces, both of which challenged local civil and religious leadership in Mennonite villages, but also irked Russian authorities. For instance, initially, they worshipped in homes, where they also took communion without the involvement of local church leaders. After the Mennonite civil authorities informed the Guardian Committee of this practice, the Committee requested that the village mayors tighten control over meetings held at private residences by Brethren, claiming that the Brethren used these meetings to make converts. The choice of outdoor immersion baptism in rivers by the Mennonite Brethren also caused consternation for the larger Mennonite community and the Russian government.

The lengthy trail of correspondence over three years between five governmental bodies over a baptism performed by Jakob Reimer illustrates the varying perceptions of which religious activities contributed to social instability and the proper use of public spaces in religious ceremonies. In the spring of 1867, the Mennonite Brethren organized a foreign missions festival in the Molochna village of Neu-Halbstadt. [210] Abram Unger and Jakob Reimer, two Mennonite Brethren religious leaders, attended the event. Inspired by the festival, Johann Friesen, a Mennonite youth from Tiege asked to be baptized. Reimer baptized Friesen by immersion in the Molochnaia River just outside of the Mennonite

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[210] Friesen, 469.

village of Alt-Halbstadt in front of a large mixed crowd of fellow Brethren and Lutherans from a local village.[211]

The early-twentieth-century Mennonite historian, P.M. Friesen, provides an explanation for how the controversy started. The Lutherans, indignant at what they had witnessed, notified the inspector of the colonies of the event. According to Friesen, this newly appointed inspector of the Guardian Committee, unaware of the Mennonite schism and its uneasy settlement, decided to pursue the complaints of the Lutheran bystanders and Johann Friesen's father, who expressed his consternation with his son's baptism into the Mennonite Brethren movement.[212]

Friesen's description of the humble origins of the controversy might be simplistic, considering the issue climbed the bureaucratic ladder to the desk of the Minister of Internal Affairs. In reality, the baptism created a stir among regional authorities and nearly cost Jakob Reimer his Mennonite colonial status. Shortly after the event, in June 1867, Pavel Kotsebu, the Governor-General of New Russia, wrote a brief message to the Guardian Committee, which simply stated that Friesen's baptism in public (*publichno*) was against public morality (*protivnym obshchestvennoi nravstvennosti*) and encouraged the Committee to petition the MGI for Reimer's removal from the colony.[213] Also supportive of exile was the Governor of Taurida, the province where the "offence" took place.[214] The Guardian Committee complied and after receiving this request, the MGI apprised the MVD of the situation by reiterating the thus far, most emphasized detail of

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[211] Ibid., 470.
[212] Ibid.
[213] GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l.551.
[214] GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l.590.

the governmental correspondence– the public nature of the baptism–and asked the MVD to decide what should be done about the situation.[215]

Tolerance, according to the MVD's Department of Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Confessions, was the best course of action. Almost a year after the incident, the Department reminded the Governor-General that deviating from the established religious practice was not a criminal offence in the empire; only civil disobedience by sectarians could be cause for prosecution.[216] In the specific case of Reimer, the Department found it difficult to understand what act Reimer had committed to justify charging him with opposing the established order. It did, however, raise the issue of the legality of the baptism, and pressed for further information on whether the baptism had been properly recorded by local officials and asked the Governor-General to specify which civil laws Reimer broke during his performance of this baptism.

Governor-General Kotsebu responded quickly, defending his position by detailing the sexually perverse and subversive nature of the Brethren's actions. He answered the Ministry by arguing that Reimer deliberately intended to provoke a reaction from local officials by conducting the ceremony publicly.[217] Also, he claimed that Reimer's performance threatened social stability as there had been similar incidents in other provinces after the event, in which half- naked men and women were baptized in rivers. To discourage others from performing similar ceremonies, Kotsebu deemed it necessary to exile Reimer. As the regional government had exiled a number of sectarians from Kherson province in 1864, who committed similar offenses to public morality, he felt justified in this action. Intimating at the looming threat posed by Reimer and others

[215] RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l.168.
[216] RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l.169.
[217] RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l.173.

like him, Kotsebu ended his letter ominously by reminding the MVD that if the Brethren began to proselytize among Orthodox believers, they should be prosecuted by the civil authorities.[218]

Still searching for reasonable cause to have Reimer exiled, on the same day that the Governor-General submitted his response to the MVD he requested from the Guardian Committee information about whether Mennonite ministers regarded the baptism as in accordance with their spiritual teachings and if the baptism was properly entered into the parish register.[219] To ascertain the validity of the baptism, the Committee broached the issue with the Mennonite community. Predictably, considering the tensions that continued to exist within the Mennonite religious community over the schism, the established church leadership disagreed over what constituted a legitimate baptism. Church leaders from Blumstein advocated the validity of the baptism, arguing that baptism constituted a sacred event between the congregation, the baptismal candidate, and God, and that nothing contrary to scripture had taken place in the Molochnaia River.[220] Voicing the opposite opinion, church elders from Aleksandrov argued that the baptism did not follow scriptural requirements and was therefore invalid. The elders took issue not with the form of baptism (immersion versus sprinkling), but rather with its performance by an unordained elder.[221] The Governor-General, confused by these differing views, requested in September 1868 that the Guardian Committee establish which Mennonite leaders had the legal right to determine whether the baptism was

[218] RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l.174.
[219] GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l.598.
[220] GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l. 604.
[221] Friesen, 470.

correct and for the Committee to provide its own opinion of which view it found more accurate.[222]

With Reimer's fate still unresolved by the spring of 1869, the Ministry of State Domains inquired with the MVD if a final decision had been reached.[223] For the MVD, tolerance toward Reimer remained the most prudent course of action and the Minister of the MVD, A.E Timashev communicated this view to the Governor-General of New Russia. He maintained that Reimer's public baptism of Friesen in the river did not merit civil prosecution and notably, he referred to the Baptists' practice of immersion baptism at a time when Baptists were not legally recognized to support his argument that the method of baptism should not be considered immoral. Crossed out in the document is also a reference to the baptism of Kievan Rus' in 988 (the beginnings of the Orthodox Church in Kievan Rus') as justifying the acceptability of public baptisms in rivers.[224] As Russian law required that all baptisms be recorded in the church register Reimer could only be reprimanded if he failed to notify local church authorities of the baptism; he could not, however, be punished for performing a public baptism.[225] Timashev ended the note by inquiring if the Governor-General could reconsider his request. In light of the MVD's position, Kotsebu agreed to withdraw his petition for Reimer's exile.[226]

By analyzing the government's involvement, a new understanding of the schism emerges. Instead of an isolated, internal religious dispute, significant only to Mennonite communities, the schism had broader implications for the region of New Russia. The vast correspondence among governmental bodies and between the government and the

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[222] GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l. 604.
[223] RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l 189.
[224] RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975 l.186.
[225] RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975 l.186.
[226] RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l. 191.

Mennonites about the schism confirms the government's deep participation in the crisis. The Brethren's transgression of ethnic, spatial and gender boundaries, which made the schism into a regional phenomenon, along with the Mennonites' constant petitioning of the government with accusations and complaints against each other, forced the involvement of multiple governmental agencies.

The Mennonite schism offers a chance to investigate how Russia's policy of religious toleration worked in practice. The reaction of the government to these events reveals underlying tensions between governmental bodies over how to resolve religious disagreements in a religious community. As each government agency based its course of action on a different interpretation of the schism, this led to conflicting policies which exacerbated instead of resolved religious tensions in the Mennonite colonies. Regional governmental authorities such as the Guardian Committee and the Governor-General viewed the sectarians as disruptive to the social order and an inherently dangerous force in the region. They supported the harsh treatment of the Brethren by the established Mennonite authorities and proposed punitive measures to be used throughout New Russia for dealing with the Huepfer movement. In contrast, central government ministries, such as the MVD and the MGI, approached religious schism from a different perspective. By prioritizing political loyalty to the state, these ministries were willing to overlook unorthodox religious practices, as long as the performance of these ceremonies did not corrupt large segments of the Orthodox population. A distinct fear of breeding fanaticism within sectarian groups tempered the responses of the ministries and guided especially the MVD to proceed with caution when dealing with the Brethren.

Despite preference at all levels of government that Mennonites and Ukrainians form solely economic relationships, these groups participated in inter-confessional dialogue and activities. While proselytizing among Ukrainians was not a priority of the movement, the Brethren clearly promoted the notion that spiritual fellowship need not to be contained within pre-existing community structures. The Brethren's use of public spaces to display and enact their beliefs challenged the Russian government's organization of Southern Russia into homogeneous ethno-religious enclaves, a core building block in Russia's policy of religious toleration to manage its religious pluralism. Through their public performance of baptism, and through their cooperation with other non-Mennonite groups, the Brethren reflected a new social consciousness emerging in Mennonite communities and in New Russia, where economic, social, and religious boundaries still mattered, but were being remodeled. In the context of the enormous possibilities and challenges unleashed by the emancipation of the peasantry and the Great Reforms, along with the economic development of the region, the Mennonite schism and its aftermath reveals the underlying difficulties of the Russian government to handle the growing complexity of regulating its borderlands.

Chapter Three: Religious Minorities and Religious Policy in Russia

Recent Russian scholarship has proposed several models describing the over-arching principles that shaped the tsarist state's treatment of religious minority groups between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. These models have tended to explore Russia's religious policy from the perspective of the state, attempting to identify the over-arching principles guiding the state's treatment of its religious minorities. In general, these models differ in the emphasis they place on the strength of ideological versus pragmatic impetus underlying the government's interpretation of religious toleration. The Mennonite schism offers a case study to test the relevance of these theories to Russia's borderlands during a period of state-driven reform. Although the Mennonite example confirms many of the points presented by these models, it also shows the importance of other mitigating factors that affected the formation of the government's policy and contributed to its ambiguity.

While few academics contest that the concept of religious toleration underpinned the Russian government's treatment of most foreign faiths from the mid-eighteenth century until 1905, debate exists over the features of this policy. Robert Crews provided one of the first detailed expositions on the topic. In addition to proposing that the government used religion as a tool of administering and supervising its territories, Crews also argues that the government appointed itself the "guardian and patron of religious 'orthodoxy' for the tolerated faiths of Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Buddhism and both branches of Armenian Christianity."[227] According to Crews, the Russian government proved unwilling to support unconditionally doctrinal changes in

[227] Robert Crews, "Empire and the Confessional State: Islam and Religious Politics in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *The American Historical Review* 108, (2003): 58.

foreign faiths. Instead, as the self-proclaimed protector of orthodoxy for foreign religions, the state declared itself the final arbiter of acceptable religious beliefs and practices and those that constituted heresy. This imbued Russian bureaucrats with the authority "to intervene in … questions of dogma, ritual, and ecclesiastical organization,"[228] which resulted in the direct participation of Russian bureaucrats in regulating the religious practices of minority communities.

The bureaucratization of religion in the Russian empire had numerous consequences for both the state and its minority groups. From a pragmatic standpoint, the incorporation of foreign faiths into the bureaucratic structure provided the Russian government with direct influence over Russia's minority groups, some of which might have been hostile to Russian rule. By bestowing the privilege of freedom of religious practice for recognized confessions, the government managed to elicit cooperation from these groups for the regulation of their faith.[229] For minority elites, close relations with the Russian government provided a source of power for their leadership and supported their authority within their communities.[230] This policy was not, however, without its difficulties. With the government involving itself in regulating faiths, the bureaucracy found itself entangled in the internal religious disputes of minority groups.[231]

Crews emphasizes the reign of Nicholas I as the key period in which the state became increasingly concerned with protecting the Orthodoxy of foreign faiths. Nicholas emphasized the principles of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality" and adopted new measures to police Russia's confessions, which reflected his self-ascribed role as "the

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[228] Ibid.,59.
[229] Ibid., 61.
[230] Ibid.
[231] Ibid., 60.

defender of absolute values."[232] To support the position of recognized faiths he codified Orthodox Christianity's position as the "predominant faith in the empire", but also emphasized the role of other religions in contributing to the strength of the Russian state.[233] These initiatives were part of an effort to institutionalize religious belief, which reflected a larger movement towards "administrative modernizations" during Nicholas' reign.[234]

Paul Werth both questions and builds upon Crews' theory to formulate his own model for interpreting the toleration and treatment of religious minorities. Werth uses schisms as his testing ground for the Russian government's policy towards foreign faiths. Unlike Crews, Werth suggests the absence of a fixed approach by the Russian government towards religious toleration. Although the government "tended to regard confessional affiliations as something stable and hereditary, with specific non-Orthodox faiths being organically linked to particular ethnic communities," this tendency did not produce a standard reaction by the government to schisms within foreign faiths.[235] In many cases, the state took into account its own social and administrative interests over religious concerns when deciding the fate of sects.[236] The prioritizing of its own practical needs for governance above an ideological commitment to the immutability of religious affiliation demonstrates the flexibility of the Russian government when interpreting religious toleration.

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[232] Laura Engelstein, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999), 50.
[233] Crews, 58.
[234] Engelstein, 50.
[235] Paul Werth, "Schism Once Removed: Sects, State Authority, and Meanings of Religious Toleration in Imperial Russia" in *Imperial Rule* Ed. Alexei Miller & Alfred J, Rieber (New York: CEU Press, 2004), 85.
[236] Ibid., 99.

According to Werth, the Russian government defined the parameters of religious toleration to include not only foreign confessions, but also individual foreign subjects. Werth postulates that through the second half of the nineteenth century, tsarist authorities "proved increasingly willing to regard toleration as applying to *individuals*."[237] This claim challenges the idea that the government formulated its policy on the basis of privileges as opposed to 'rights' until the 1905 revolution forced it to make legal provisions for the right of individuals to freedom of conscience. Therefore, Werth proposes that a new interpretation of religious toleration was developing within the Russian government and increasingly affected the way in which it understood religion – as an individual as opposed to community experience.

Werth cites the example of the confessional transfer of a group of Armenians from the Armenian Gregorian Church to the Lutheran Church as evidence of this claim. For political and historical reasons, the Armenian Church occupied a position of importance to the Russian government.[238] The unique position of the Armenian Church as Russia's Christian representative in the predominately Muslim Caucasus, combined with the size of the Armenian diaspora population in nearly by Turkey, made the Church an important ally for the government. In the 1860s, the government's commitment to support the Armenian Church was tested as a group of Armenians petitioned the government for permission to join the Evangelical-Lutheran Church. After failing to reconcile both sides, the state uncomfortably decided to support the right of these Armenians to join the Lutherans. Even though this act could potentially bring negative consequences, the government decided that "inhibiting the freedom of conscience and

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[237] Ibid., 100.[emphasis in the original]
[238] Ibid., 90.

religious beliefs of the petitioners was inconsistent with imperial law and, by creating martyrs, would only generate greater sympathy for them and their teachings."[239] In this case, Werth argues, a commitment to 'freedom of conscience' won out over protecting the integrity of a recognized confession.

Increasingly throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the state trusted and co-operated less with the established religious hierarchies of minority faiths.[240] Instead of relying on tolerated religious institutions to provide a stable identity for its subjects, the state placed more emphasis on the development of Russia's "civil order" as the bulwark of the tsarist state.[241] Within this context, the attitude of the state towards foreign sectarians shifted, as it began to "evaluate the dangers of sects in terms of social, as opposed to religious, terms -- or "harm" as opposed to "heresy" -- [which] opened up a space for sects originating in the foreign confessions, as long as their teachings were compatible with the prevailing order."[242] The prioritizing of social stability over religious fidelity enabled foreign sectarians to practise their faith, as long as they did not disrupt the social order.

Also, numerous practical concerns affected the government's treatment of religious minorities. For instance, as the basic record-keepers and performers of ceremonies related to births, deaths and marriages, the clergy played an important administrative function in the empire.[243] Unable to collect these records itself, the state relied on Orthodox, as well as non-Orthodox clergy to perform these tasks. Religious schisms, like most community disputes, involved hard feelings, tensions and broken

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[239] Ibid., 91.
[240] Ibid., 95-96.
[241] Ibid., 96.
[242] Ibid., 99.
[243] Ibid., 97.

relationships. In most cases, the established community was unwilling to acknowledge the schismatics and the clergy refused to perform these administrative tasks. This act cut the government off from vital information about its population, during a period when it needed this information for economic and social reforms.

In the cases where local clergy refused to perform these tasks, the schismatics could not legally get married or bury their dead; therefore, on a practical level the state needed to resolve religious disputes to ensure social stability within communities. For example, the outrage of Orthodox believers over the burial of Baptists in village cemeteries typifies these deep tensions.[244] This situation was mirrored in many non-Russian religious minority communities, as village and religious life intertwined in ways that made them virtually impossible to untangle. The government also realized that many religious dissidents preferred to live without state recognition rather than renounce their faith. Yet, as the state underwent intense administrative, social and economic restructuring after the emancipation of the serfs, it could not push forward in its reforms without stronger control at the regional and local levels. The state attempted to solve this problem by recognizing certain religious dissident movements as tolerated confessions. For instance, the practical need to regulate the growth of the Baptist confession among Germans contributed to the government's decision to recognize their right to spiritual existence in 1879. [245]

Both Werth and Crews touch on the important role played by minority groups in shaping how policies of religious toleration affected their communities. According to

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[244] Heather Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 87.
[245] Ibid, 20.

Crews, the state supported local religious elites in exchange for their political loyalty.[246] State support gave local elites the authority to define community values and to enforce their co-religionists' compliance with them. Werth also emphasizes the important role of minority groups in determining how religion disputes were settled. However, he argues that local religious authorities also could play a key role in supporting the recognition of their schismatic groups and thereby approving confessional breaks. Werth cites the involvement of the Lutheran religious leadership in promoting the recognition of the Baptist confession by the government as an example. The Lutherans argued that as a non-approved confession the Baptists were uninhibited in their actions.[247] To curb the Baptists' activities, the Lutheran leadership supported the recognition and therefore regulation of the Baptist faith by the Russian state. Werth succinctly summarizes: "In short, all other faiths in the empire had to play by certain rules, and the Lutherans saw no reason why the Baptists should be an exception."[248]

Notably, Crews and Werth do not mention a role for the Russian Orthodox Church in shaping the treatment of minority groups. In contrast, Peter Waldron, who offered one of the first attempts at articulating a model for understanding the interaction of the state with minority religions, stresses that an incomplete analysis would focus solely on the relationship between the state and the religious minority group. Instead, Waldron proposes that issues of religious toleration be understood by a triangular model of actors: the state, the Orthodox Church and religious minorities.[249] The politicized nature of religion within the Russian empire complicates the picture, as the Russian

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[246] Crews, 61.
[247] Werth, 89.
[248] Ibid.
[249] Peter Waldron, "Religious Toleration" in *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia* ed. Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 104.

government was not a neutral religious referee within a multi-confessional empire, but an ardent advocate of the Orthodox faith. While the degree of religious piety fluctuated from tsar to tsar, the over-arching notion of Russia as an Orthodox state never subsided, with images and rituals from the Orthodox faith infused through the autocracy's representation of itself and its power.[250] Therefore, although the government promoted principles of religious toleration and granted state protection to certain non-Orthodox faiths within the empire, the Russian Orthodox Church retained a special place within the Russian state ideology.

According to Waldron, the foremost consideration for the regime was the preservation of its authority; all decisions, even those of a religious nature, reflected this practical priority.[251] This priority serves as a partial explanation for the fluctuating treatment of religious minorities by the state. The government struggled to maintain the predominant position of the Orthodox Church, while simultaneously supporting foreign minority faiths present in Russia. Waldron cites the example of Alexander II's reign as demonstrating this attempt to pacify both sides. In the mid-1860s, amid "an atmosphere of discontent," Alexander's government used the carrot of religious freedoms to ensure the support of minority faiths for the regime.[252] Yet, concessions to foreign faiths displeased the Orthodox Church, which pressured the government to promote its privileged position. To pacify the Orthodox Church, Alexander approved an increase in the financial contributions by the government to support the Orthodox churches in the predominantly Lutheran Baltic provinces at the same time that he allowed minority

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[250] See Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in the Russian Monarchy* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995).
[251] Waldron, 109.
[252] Ibid.

groups greater freedoms.[253] These "contradictory policies" show how the tsar's pragmatic concern with maintaining all potential pillars of support for the monarchy affected the formation of religious policy in the empire.

The Mennonite schism offers an opportunity to test the models of Crews, Werth and Waldron, and to sketch out how religious toleration functioned in the Russian empire. An in-depth analysis of the Mennonite schism reveals the significance of both ideology and pragmatism in the Russian government's treatment of the Mennonite schism. Although the MVD preferred stable religious identities, it understood the inclination of certain confessions towards religious disputes. The Mennonite example also reveals a number of other mitigating factors under-acknowledged by these models that contributed to the ambiguity of the state's religious policy. The reformist atmosphere that began to develop under Nicholas I created new opportunities for the state bureaucracy to think about Russia's pressing social, economic and administrative issues. The "enlightened bureaucrats" who shaped Russia's Great Reforms in the 1860s rose through the ranks of the bureaucracy under Nicholas and brought with them a new perspective on the ills that impeded Russia's development in comparison with western Europe.[254] These officials sought to re-make the bureaucracy by bolstering the bureaucratic ranks with highly-educated, talented and motivated individuals, who shared a commitment to developing Russia's civic order, in part through standardizing its administrative system. The Mennonite case illustrates the difficulties of achieving this vision in a multi-confessional setting.

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[253] Ibid., 114.
[254] W. Bruce Lincoln, *In the Vanguard of Reform: Russia's Enlightened Bureaucrats 1825-1861* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1982), 41.

The importance of religious orthodoxy to the Russian government can be discerned from the Brethren's secession document. The Brethren explicitly stated that their break from the established churches did not constitute a new movement. They claimed to follow Mennonite doctrine and denied introducing new practices into their religious worship.[255] The Brethren maintained this position in their first communication with the Guardian Committee. They took issue with the established churches' representation of their movement as a "newly arisen sect" and continued to portray their belief as harmonious with the Mennonite confession of faith.[256] The Brethren publicly emphasized their lineage from Menno Simons in part to legitimize their movement in the eyes of the Russian government, just as the established Mennonite churches portrayed the movement as a newly arisen sect for the opposite purpose. This 'Mennonite positioning' by both sides, shows the importance attached to religious labels by minority groups. To be labeled a heretic by the government affected the state's treatment of a religious group, even in minority communities. The Mennonites' reaction to their schism demonstrates the politicized nature of religious affiliation and the existence of the government's self-defined role as the guardian for religious orthodoxy of tolerated foreign faiths.

As the Mennonite case also exemplifies, local judicial institutions had a significant role in determining the treatment of religious minorities. The arrest of the Brethren on charges of converting Orthodox Christians from their faith, and of starting a new sect, indicated the court's willingness to uphold the state's laws on proselytizing and its commitment to maintaining the Orthodoxy of foreign faiths. The inability of the established Mennonite churches to articulate how the Mennonite Brethren deviated from

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[255] Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, trans. J.B. Toews, A. Friesen et al. Fresno, Calif., 1978), 245.
[256] Ibid.

the Mennonite confession of faith forced the court to drop the second charge. While it is not clear from the court documents what would have happened if the court had found the Brethren guilty of establishing a new sect, the Ekaterinoslav court believed such a ruling to be in its jurisdiction.[257] Crews and Werth fail to mention the courts as another actor involved in defining religious toleration by deciding whether a dissident group constituted an illegal break from an approved confession.

This debate over heresy versus social stability also was present in the national authorities' ruminations over the Mennonite schism, albeit in a different form. For instance, the MVD focused part of its energy on demonstrating the internal factors in the Mennonite community that caused the schism. According to the MVD, the weakness of the Mennonites' ecclesiastical structure and leadership was an important reason for the appearance of 'heresy' in the Mennonite confession. A series of reports signed by the Director of the Department of Spiritual Affairs, G. Sivers, emphasized these factors as causes for the Mennonites' inclination towards religious disputes. He wrote:

> In case of disagreements, each party considers its own interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and teaching of Menno Simons to be the correct one, and their opponents' interpretation as incorrect. The Mennonites do not have a supreme spiritual authority, held in honour by all, who could therefore restore unity among the congregations in case of disputes.[258]

Sivers argued that these factors caused continual problems in the Mennonite colonies, as disputes were many.[259] Sivers also cited the weak theological training of Mennonite

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[257] The effect of Alexander II's judicial reforms on the involvement of the courts in religious disputes has not been extensively explored.

[258] John B.Toews,ed., *The Story of the Early Mennonite Brethren: Reflections of a Lutheran Churchman* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2002), 137.

[259] In fact, Sivers wrote, "In the last twenty-five years, the Mennonites of the Taurida colonies (refers to the Molochna colony) have separated into seven different divisions and are often in disagreement with each other." Toews 137. While over the years splits had indeed occurred, Sivers failed to recall the role of the Guardian Committee in dividing a Mennonite congregation into three parts in response to the Warkentin incident.

religious leaders as causation for the appearance of sectarian movements: "Although both Protestants and Mennonites are very strict in the way they follow church order and lead a moral life, the Mennonites present a fertile soil for the emergence of sectarians because they have no theologically educated leaders."[260] Therefore, according to the MVD, from a sociological standpoint, the Mennonite confession had many characteristics of a sect, which encouraged religious disputes in Mennonite communities.

The absence of a hierarchical body that could make a binding ruling on Mennonite doctrine limited the government's ability to establish what constituted 'religious orthodoxy.' The MVD's acknowledgement of the tendency of the Mennonite confession to splinter and to breed accusations of heresy amongst co-religionists did not mean that the government sought to assess which beliefs reflected the "true" Mennonite doctrine. For instance, although the MVD recognized the predisposition of the Mennonite community towards religious dispute, it preferred to categorize religious groups on the basis of their threat to the political order. Those groups judged to be politically innocuous, even if they strayed from their group's religious doctrine, were deemed acceptable, as this excerpt from Sivers' report illustrates: "Purely religious sects do not present a threat to the established order. Their teachings, although based on false interpretations, does not provide enough reason for the persecution or the oppression of the sectarians by the government, which tolerates all religions."[261] The willingness of the MVD to overlook the "false interpretation" of religious sectarian groups shows that it considered the protection of the established order, not guarding religious orthodoxy in

[260] Toews, 161[A report on the Protestant sects of South Russia, undated].
[261] Toews, 165.

minority faiths, as its primary mandate. When schisms did occur, the MVD left the duty of religious policing and reconciliation to religious leaders in that community.

The MVD was not completely indifferent to the appearance of apolitical sectarian groups. It expressed concerns over the social instability caused by religious discord in Mennonite communities. According to the MVD, disruption to social stability did not necessarily imply subversive political activities directed toward weakening tsarist authority. The case of Johann Friesen reveals that the MVD defined instability to include, for instance, ostensibly mundane issues, such as not properly registering baptisms.

Although the MVD prioritized social stability over policing heresy, this prioritization did not imply a tacit recognition of individual rights. The MVD approached the issue of religious affiliation from a pragmatic stance, where it acknowledged the existence of sectarianism and addressed the fallout of these religious breaks, but did not recognize the right of individuals to follow their inner spiritual desires. Instead, the MVD urged the ecclesiastical authorities to repair spiritual relations in their communities and to shepherd their lost sheep back to the fold through spiritual reconciliation as opposed to state intervention. As the case of the Mennonites illustrates, the MVD's willingness to tolerate the Mennonite Brethren stemmed in part from its fear that a hasty reaction to the situation would encourage the development of fanaticism among the Brethren.[262]

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) had limited involvement in shaping these proceedings. Government documents presented the ROC's participation as peripheral to addressing the state's central concerns about the Mennonite schism. These documents showed that the ROC's primary function was to address the spiritual health of those

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[262] S.D Bondar, *Sekta mennonitov v' rossii; v' sviazi s' istorii niemetskoi kolonizatzii na iuge rossii: ocherk'*. (Petrograd Tipografiia V.D Smirnova, 1916),132.

Orthodox believers who renounced their faith. For instance, in the case of Heinrich Huebert, whom the government accused of converting a Russian peasant girl, the extent of the ROC's involvement amounted to only a priest trying to encourage Priska Morosova to return to her Orthodox roots.[263] In general, memoranda by the MVD expressed little concern with the ROC's perception of the Brethren. Instead, the MVD made extensive use of information gathered by the representative of the Lutheran consistory, Alexander Brune, and numerous governmental officials. Yet, these documents do not reveal the entire extent to which the ROC may have been involved, especially in connection with the relationship between the Mennonite Brethren and the shtundists. For example, in 1868, the archbishop of Odessa wrote to Pavel Kotsebu, the Governor General of New Russia, expressing his concern about the blossoming relationship between a Russian schismatic movement (shtunda) and German colonists. Although the archbishop did not directly identify the Mennonite Brethren as instigators in this movement, he indicated that the sectarians conferred with leaders of a German sect (*soveshchat'sia s vozhakami sekty –nemtsami*).[264]

The Mennonite case presents a number of significant issues underlying the schism not covered by existing models of religious toleration. Notably, these themes have parallels in the relatively recent academic literature on Russian Orthodoxy and Russian sectarian groups.[265] The commonalities and differences between the experiences of Russian and non-Russian sectarians is an under-explored field. Although the issue of

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[263] Toews, 157.

[264] Aleksii (Dorodnitsyn) *Materialy dlia istorii religiozno-ratsionalisticheskogo dvizheniia na iuge Rossii vo vtoroi polovine 19-go st.* (Kazan': Tsentral'naia tipografiia, 1908), 65.

[265] See Sergei Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation: Peasants, Millennialism, and Radical Sects in Southern Russia and Ukraine, 1830-1917.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004);Nicholas Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Heather Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005)

ethnicity looms large over any type of comparison between these groups, since ethnic Slav sectarians encountered prejudice for disregarding their "ancestral faith," room still exists to explore how official and unofficial toleration worked to regulate religious belief in imperial Russia.[266] Such a comparison also would help to uncover any patterns in the reaction of communities to broader social, economic and religious changes taking place in the empire.

Enlightened bureaucrats in St. Petersburg had a firm sense of how they thought Russia's administrative system should work, but their priorities did not always match those of local and regional officials. The Mennonite schism reveals how government officials struggled to develop a consensus on the social and administrative interests of the state. Regional officials shared the MVD's concern over the impact of the Mennonite schism on social stability in the region; yet, their interpretation of what type of actions contributed to social instability differed. The conflict over Johann Friesen's baptism aptly illustrates this point. For example, the reaction by the Governor-General of New Russia to Friesen's public baptism shows the concern by regional authorities over public ceremonies, which they labeled as threatening to the social stability of the region. Although not explicitly articulated, the regional government's obsessive association of Reimer's performance of a public baptism with social immorality (and social immorality as a challenge to civil order) reflects a fear of unregulated religious rituals. As the Reimer case illustrates– in this specific case through the attendance of German-speaking colonists from diverse backgrounds– these types of public events created the opportunity

[266] The notion of ancestral faith also held importance for foreign confessions. For instance, the government recognized the historical significance of the Catholic faith for the Poles and the Lutheran faith for the Germans. Yet, the government still allowed for conversion from these faiths to the Russian Orthodox confession, whereas Russian law forbade Orthodox believers to convert to other faiths.

for people from different religious and ethnic affiliations to mix and worship together. This fear affected the willingness of regional authorities to tolerate these types of ceremonies. In contrast, the MVD found public baptism to be perfectly acceptable and even justified the Brethren's actions by referring to other religious groups that practised the same ritual.

With the expansion of the empire, the task of implementing government policy increasing fell to poorly trained local officials, who did not necessarily share the commitment of Russia's enlightened bureaucrats in St. Petersburg to broader reform. Underpaid and undersupervised, in many cases corrupt local officials created their own fiefdoms. The treatment of the Dukhobors exhibits how local officials could disregard the policy goals from the upper level authorities in St. Petersburg. In the late nineteenth century, the Russian government relied on the Dukhobors to be its Russian representatives in the Caucasus. Highly useful to the state, particularly during the Crimean War and the Russo-Turkish War, the government relied on these sectarians to help consolidate the Caucasus into the empire by performing an array of administrative tasks. While the Dukhobors received praise from central and regional officials for their service to the state, local government representatives used their positions of power over the Dukhobors for economic benefit. The Dukhobors accused the district administrator of demanding bribes "on any and every possible occasion: for passports, for the release of arrestees and for the cessation of legal affairs."[267] In fact, the frequency with which the local officials arrested Dukhobor members led some to postulate that officials approached

[267] Nicholas Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 243.

their duties "as a moneymaking venture."[268] This treatment bred contempt by the Dukhobors towards Russian "law" and Russian "rule."[269] The actions of local officials exacerbated pre-existing tensions created by the state's increasing incursion into local life and served to further poison the relationship between the Dukhobors and the Russian government.

Local government officials were not the only group to express skepticism through their actions of the government's reforms. Local communities also found it difficult to adapt to the government's shift towards a civil order. The intertwining of civil and religious life for many communities, including the Mennonites, created difficulties in cases of religious disputes. Sectarian groups had to rely on the state to protect not only their religious, but also their civil, rights. The Mennonite authorities contended that by leaving the church, the Brethren had forfeited their access to Mennonite privileges and also civil rights. In fact, after the initial break in the church, the internal politics within Mennonite colonies influenced the nature of religious toleration offered to the Brethren. In particular, their complaints to national officials forced the government to investigate the Brethren's claims of mistreatment, which pressured local officials to provide the civil assistance that they had denied the Brethren. For example, when the Molochna district office refused to renew Johann Claassen's travel pass to allow him to stay in St. Petersburg to negotiate the relocation of the Brethren to the Caucasus, Claassen turned to the Ministry of the Domains and the former head of the Guardian Committee, Evgenii von Hahn, for assistance.[270] In a letter to the district office, Claassen emphasized Hahn's displeasure at hearing that the district office seemed to be abusing its authority. Claassen

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[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid., 244.
[270] Friesen, 365.

quoted Hahn's assessment of his situation: "To those who have paid their fees, as you have, a pass can in no way be denied and the [district office] is legally bound to give one to you."[271] Claassen adamantly defended his civil rights despite his religious beliefs against his former co-religionists and he willingly sought justice through Russian officials.

Thirty-five years later, Russian Baptists faced a similar struggle over access to civil rights. In the conversion stories of Russian Baptists, neophytes recorded facing discrimination in their workplaces and ostracism from their communities and families.[272] Orthodox communities readily meted out punishment against their own religious sectarians, denying them their civil rights. In these cases, the Baptists turned to the state for safety from 'community justice.' For example, Russian Baptists complained bitterly to the Russian authorities about the violence perpetrated against them by Orthodox believers in their villages.[273] Their complaints arrived at the upper echelon of the Russian government. A report submitted to the Prime Minister, Petr A. Stolypin, apprised him of the Baptists' claim that they lived in "constant fear of being beaten, not daring to leave the house, to light a fire in the hut, without the risk of attack or outrage."[274] Concern for social cohesion in the countryside after the 1905 edict on religious toleration (which allowed Russians to practise faiths other than Orthodoxy) placed the government in the paradoxical position of having to protect the civil rights of Russian Baptist converts to follow their beliefs –a faith that it had previously persecuted.[275]

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[271] Ibid.
[272] Coleman, 58.
[273] Ibid., 87.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid, 90.

The Mennonite schism provides a case study to test the importance of pragmatism and ideology to the formation of Russia's religious policy during a period of state-driven reform. Although the Mennonite example confirms many of the points presented by scholars such as Crews, Werth and Waldron, it also shows the effect of other mitigating factors that contributed to the ambiguity of Russia's religious policy towards its minority confessions. For instance, the absence of a consensus between officials in St. Petersburg, local officials in the provinces and local communities over how religious sectarians should be treated caused a number of difficulties for the implementing a standardized policy. Particularly as the government sought to improve the country's economic and social structure, these differences of opinion affect rate and depth of the government's reform.

Conclusion

The last ten years have seen a dramatic growth in scholarship on religious life in Russia. A previously understudied field, scholars have begun to realize the value of using religion and popular religiosity as a lens through which to understand the social, political and cultural development of the Russian empire. By resituating religious identity, belief, and practice as an integral component of Russia's imperial fabric, this literature explores new questions about the governance of multi-confessional territories and the role of religious affiliation in the formation and interpretation of identities for individuals, communities, states and empires. How Russia governed its religiously heterogeneous empire reveals the pragmatic and ideological influences which underlay its policy toward religious minorities. It also reveals a significant role for minority confessions in shaping their interaction with the Russian state.

Particularly in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, as the Russian government faced the great challenge of stimulating economic change while homogenizing social and cultural life in an attempt to modernize the state, the question of how religious pluralism fit into this new, emerging social order caused debates among government officials and the intelligentsia. The government, busy defending its power structure against the by-product of the changes it was, itself, pushing forward, seemed in little hurry to formulate a concrete policy to answer this question. Instead, the government continued to rely on the nebulous concept of 'religious toleration' to formulate Russia's religious policy, until 1905, when widespread unrest forced the government to make concessions to the populace and the tsar acknowledged a limited right for individuals to choose their own spiritual beliefs.

As the tsarist state grappled with how to maintain the political status quo while breaking down the social and cultural structures that had served for centuries as the lynchpin of the monarchy, minority groups also encountered challenges around how to navigate their changing local circumstances. Produced partially by state policies and in part by local initiatives, these challenges emerged as traditional boundaries of community life became increasingly porous and former pillars of societal cohesion weakened with the emergence of new social and economic forces. Economic expansion through trade and industrialization and the growth of new forms of communication and transportation contributed to the blurring of dividing lines between communities. For example, the building of a Russian Orthodox Church in the Mennonite village of Einlage for Ukrainian workers ended the monopoly of the Mennonite church over Einlage's spiritual landscape. In the midst of this change, religion did not fall by the wayside, but instead proved to be still a relevant issue in the ongoing debate over the future forms of local, as well as national, social structures.

The 1860s Mennonite schism illustrates this vibrant role of religion in local rural life and the ways in which religious belief generated challenges to community norms and in turn was shaped by changes taking place in the Mennonite social structure. An examination of how the Brethren and the larger community negotiated the split reveals a deep divergence of opinion over access to religious and civil rights in the colonies and over the parameters of acceptable spiritual behaviour. For Mennonites, this split raised difficult questions about the role of the laity in religious ceremonies and the puncturing of ethno-confessional boundaries in the region.

Traditionally, Mennonite historiography has emphasized the relevance of the schism to the development of Mennonite religious, social and cultural life. Yet, as this thesis has argued, the significance of the schism extends beyond a localized, Mennonite interpretation. The 1860s schism illustrates how an ostensibly internal disagreement challenged religious and social boundaries between Mennonites and their neighbours and exposed conflicting views among Mennonite leaders and government officials over how to resolve these tensions. It also illustrates how the government applied the notion of religious toleration at the beginning of period of reforms in the Russian empire and the issues that Russian officials deemed relevant to determining whether or not the Brethren should be tolerated. The timing of the Mennonite schism, almost simultaneously with the emancipation of the peasantry and reforms to local political and judicial systems, creates a case study by which to assess the state's approach to religious plurality in the late imperial period and reveals how changes to the Russian political and social situation affected the treatment of religious minorities by the government.

Mennonites historically protected the autonomy of their communities from outside forces; however, the disruption created by the schism in daily Mennonite life caused both groups to look outside internal channels of dispute resolution to the Russian government. Instead of demonstrating the enlightenment of Russia's policy towards its minority groups, the state's involvement in mediating this crisis reveals its muddled approach at governing its borderlands. Russia officials were unable to agree on the best method for dealing with the schism. This disagreement forced the Mennonites to resolve the crisis on their own. Eventually, through Johann Claassen's persistent petitioning of government officials in St. Petersburg, some of the Brethren re-settled in the Caucasus.

Over the course of a few years, Claassen managed to negotiate the recognition of the Brethren's Mennonite colonial status from the Governor of Caucasus. In New Russia, Mennonites faced more pressing issues such as the landless crisis, which diffused some of the community's focus on religious differences.

The role of the Russian government in the Mennonite schism illustrates how the involvement of so many different levels of government, each with its own priorities, contributed to a poorly enunciated religious policy, which failed to alleviate tensions and resolve this dispute. As the Mennonite Brethren transgressed ethnic and spatial boundaries, different levels of government proposed competing solutions to these issues. The reaction of these various governmental bodies illustrates a factor affecting the treatment of religious minority faiths previously under-acknowledged by the academic literature. Each government agency interpreted the significance of the schism differently, which led to a haphazard approach to resolving tensions in the Mennonite community and to normalizing the Brethren's relationship to the state.

Notably, religious ceremonies emerged as one of the key area of contestation between the government, sectarians and their former co-religionists. The impassioned approach to religious ceremonies by the Brethren created loud, frenetic, joyous religious gatherings. The use of musical instruments, accompanied by dancing, singing and improvised forms of worship drew spectators to watch the proceedings. In 1860, the Molochna district office informed the colony inspector that the Huepfer loudly sang inside and outside their homes, where Russian and other servants could witness their so-called debauchery.[276] These events, according to the district office, were in clear violation of the general order (*obshchi poriadok*) as they posed a potential opportunity for people

[276] RGIA f.821, op.5, d.976, l.39.

from different religious and ethnic background to mix and worship together. The Brethren's form of worship challenged the Russian government's vision of its multi-ethnic and multi-confessional empire as a patchwork quilt where ethno-religious groups formed separate and distinctive patches.

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